

Editorial

Inevitable decision

■ Our view: Only way for board president to end perceptions of conflict was to resign. Thomas G. Kump put the public good before more egotistical concerns Monday when he resigned from the Elmira School Board.

Kump, who had been president of the board, cited a "perceived conflict of interest" between his school role and his job as director of environmental health with the Chemung County Health Department. His Health Department job makes him a key player in the investigation of possible links between what some say are a high number of cancer cases at Southside High School and environmental contamination.

Let's be clear: Kump didn't have to resign from the school board. By all accounts, he did a fine job distinguishing between his role as board president and his responsibilities with the Health Department. He is widely respected as a thoughtful, thorough, knowledgeable team player.

His calm engineer's demeanor also has served him well in helping the community grapple with the implications of the Southside High School cancer investigation.

In public forums at which others have allowed themselves to be swept away by emotion, Kump has remained remarkably calm.

And Kump deserves a share of credit for the fact that the community has thus far avoided the temptation to point fingers or search out a scapegoat. There is not the slightest whiff of demagoguery about the man.

■ Controversy is likely to be a prolonged one.

Nevertheless, and despite his best intentions, Kump found himself in a conflict of his own making — one that suddenly developed in May as he was being elected to a second term on the board. Had the questions surrounding Southside High School been resolved quickly, he could have stuck it out.

But a prolonged, emotional controversy, as this is likely to be, will raise the issue again and again about which hat Kump is wearing — that of board president or environmental health director.

At this stage, there is no telling where this investigation might lead.

Eventually, school board members might find themselves deciding whether to take action at Southside, such as a costly environmental cleanup or, at the extreme, closing the school. As a key Health Department official in Chemung County, Kump may be called upon for advice or to make a recommendation regarding the school's future.

To his credit, Kump is sufficiently sensitive to public perceptions and concerned enough about his own effectiveness that he believed he could serve the community best by leaving the board. His departure, in a sense, ratifies the good things many people believe about him.

Kump had tried his best to distance his board duties from his Health Department role. In recent weeks, he had turned over the job of chief school board spokesman on the Southside matter to the board vice president, Walter Badeau. In Kump's mind and to board members, that move may have more clearly separated his two roles, but to the public, there was bound to remain confusion.

■ A decorum that others would be wise to emulate.

The only way to end the blurring of the perception between Kump's two roles was for him to step away from one of them.

The cancer investigation is entering a particularly delicate stage, if last week's public meeting in the Southside High auditorium is any indication.

The absence of definite answers regarding a possible environmental link to cancers among current and former students has left patients, parents and others fearful and frustrated. Some members of last week's audience stormed from the hall, yelling at state officials as they left.

That's probably not the last of the shouting.

On a positive note, Kump will continue his crucial role in the Southside investigation, working to unravel the cancer mystery in his Health Department job. We're hopeful that some of his personal style will rub off on the more combustible personalities involved.

Kump told an interviewer last month, "My goal is to help make this area a better place." Fortunately for the rest of us, he will still have plenty of opportunities to work toward that goal.



KUMP

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