

Ousted Olka seeks return to Tonawanda school board

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Three months ago, Elizabeth Olka was forced to resign from the City of Tonawanda School Board as part of a plea deal after a harassment violation.

There is nothing stopping her from running for the board again—and Olka is. She is hoping residents will forgive her and return her to the board when they go to the polls Tuesday.

Two members of the board have filed police complaints against Olka. One of those complaints led to her arrest in March 2010 on charges of second-degree aggravated harassment and fourth-degree stalking, both misdemeanors. A certified teacher who is currently unemployed, Olka said one mistake should not block her from holding public office.

“I made a mistake — absolutely,” she said. “I didn’t know what I was doing was illegal. Now I’m the one being harassed.”

The arrest came after Olka harassed Jolyne Weber while both were working for the City of Tonawanda Parks and Recreation Department. At the time, Weber was working a summer job with the city while attending college. After Weber went back to school, Olka, 33, continued to contact her, according to court transcripts of the case, with repeated text and e-mail messages and comments on internet sites.

“It was annoying at first, but it was something you could block [and] you can deal with it,” Weber testified. “Then it got to the point that after blocking it, after having people tell her, after trying to make it stop, it just wouldn’t end.”

Weber’s father is James Weber, who was serving as the City of Tonawanda School Board vice president at the time. Olka’s adversarial relationship with the Weber family grew to the point that the family contacted police, who then told Olka to stay away.

Limited to what she can say because of an order of protection issued in the case, Olka said she had a “disagreement” with Jolyne Weber that escalated when her father brought the issue to the School Board. Olka said she sent Jolyne an e-mail of apology, but the Weber family contacted police to have her arrested.

After her arrest, the Tonawanda City School District launched an investigation into Olka that cost \$49,000. After a few months, the district closed the investigation without taking any action against her.

On several occasions, district officials have publicly remarked about allegations of a second harassment incident against Olka, but few are willing to divulge details.

Shortly after Olka’s arrest, the mother of the alleged victim submitted a letter to Tonawanda Police detailing the second harassment case, which reportedly occurred in 2007 when Olka taught the 17-year-old student. The family has never pressed charges against Olka, despite repeated inquiries from Tonawanda Police and the Erie County District Attorney’s office.

To date, the district has kept the investigation report hidden, quashing a subpoena from the Erie County District Attorney’s office and denying The Buffalo News a Freedom of Information Act request to view the report, claiming attorney-client privilege.

“In light of the potential for litigation on the underlying subject, the report is also subject to the prohibition of disclosure of documents prepared in anticipation of litigation,” the district response reads.

The School Board is scheduled to discuss releasing the Olka investigation report at its May 24 meeting — one week after the board elections. If Olka is the top vote-getter in the election, she would be sworn in at that meeting.

Meanwhile, Olka has continued to attend most School Board meetings and often speaks out during public comment periods.

She is one of four candidates vying for two three-year seats on the board: the incumbent, Danielle Opalinski, and Diana Misner and Robert E. Starr II.

“It’s wrong that she’s running again,” said James Weber, who is no longer on the board. “She’s throwing it in the face of the community and has no respect for the justice system.”

Olka, 33, who graduated from Tonawanda High School, said she wants to join the board again to return pride to the school system, which has faced the challenges of an enrollment decline.

One of her pet projects is an anti-bullying program — and she concedes she feels bullied by her critics on and off the board.

“We’re doing great things, but is there more to do? Absolutely,” she said. “People may not like my style, but they know I’m fighting for them and their kids. Regardless of whether I sit on the board or not, I will be there.”