

Crime | updated: 4/23/2018 4:46 PM

Plea deals reached in District 128 perjury cases



Ellen Mauer

**Lee Filas****Russell Lissau**

A former Libertyville-Vernon Hills Area High School District 128 board member and a district employee charged with lying on 2017 election petitions pleaded guilty Monday to reduced charges of violating election law.

Ellen Mauer, 52, who resigned from the school board March 19, and district secretary Denise Zwit, 66, each pleaded guilty to one misdemeanor count of disregarding election code.

Lake County circuit court Judge Victoria Rossetti sentenced each to one year of court supervision, a \$750 fine, 75 hours of public service hours, and a \$250 donation to the Zacharias Sexual Abuse Center in Gurnee.

Mauer is not allowed to serve in any official capacity with District 128 for one year. Zwit is not allowed to serve as recording secretary at district school board meetings until her expected retirement in June.

"Both individuals took responsibility for their actions, and we feel the disposition was appropriate," said Assistant Lake County State's Attorney Fred Day. "Hopefully, this sends a message to people in Lake County that election rules need to be followed."

Defense attorney Brian Smith did not comment after the court hearing.

After her court appearance, Mauer said the actions that led to the charges and Monday's plea were accidental.

"I made a mistake on a piece of paper," she said.

Mauer and Zwit were initially charged with varying counts of felony perjury alleging they falsified nominating petitions before the spring 2017 election. Both pleaded not guilty and were free from Lake County jail after posting 10 percent of their \$25,000 bail.

Authorities said Mauer signed four petitions that claimed she was present when her nomination petitions were circulated. Zwit, who continues to work as assistant to District 128 Superintendent Prentiss Lea, claimed she was present when three nominating petitions for school board President Patrick Groody were circulated, authorities said.

They faced up to five years in prison had they been found guilty at trial. The felony perjury charges were dropped as part of the negotiated deal.

Mauer, who won her election in 2017, stepped down from the school board last month. When asked if her resignation was part of a plea agreement, she said prosecutors "took (it) into consideration."

Mauer also is principal at Spaulding Elementary School in Gurnee. She doesn't believe the guilty plea will affect her employment, saying she's never heard a concern from Gurnee District 56 officials about the situation.

She said she's grateful for the "overwhelming support" she's received from the community, in Libertyville and Lake County at large.

"This couldn't be a greater community to live in," she said.

The District 128 board hasn't yet named Mauer's replacement on the panel. Her term was to expire in 2021, but her successor will be up for election in 2019 because it's an incomplete term.

District 128 spokeswoman Mary Todoric said officials would not comment on the case.

Groody has not been accused of any wrongdoing. However, District 128 resident Tim Anderson said he believes Groody should be removed because he obtained a spot on the ballot through Zwit's illegal actions.

"Their crime was cheating to get on the ballot," Anderson said after court. "He gained a seat to the board through a criminal act."

In response, Groody said he does not intend to resign.

Groody said he's glad the case is over "for all the individuals involved." He called it an "unfortunate event."

"I can assure you there was never any intent to do anything sinister," Groody said of Mauer and Zwit. "It's just not in their DNA."