

JAKE **GRIFFIN**

**SUBURBAN
TAX WATCHDOG**

School board's travel tab tops \$34,000

A 114-mile round trip drive from her Gurnee home to a workshop in Naperville June 9 was too much for a long-time Woodland Elementary District 50 school board member.

So she checked into the Hyatt Regency in Lisle the night before and had taxpayers cover the \$125 bill.



Terry Hall

"It's a long commute, so I always go in the night before for these things," District 50 board member Terry

Hall said.

"I follow the same procedure that I do in my own work as a CPA."

Hall's attendance at the Illinois Association of School Boards' LeaderShop Academy Symposium that ran from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. ultimately cost District 50 taxpayers \$200 more for the registration fee and \$62 for her mileage reimbursement.

"It's not common for members or employees to submit lodging accommodations for a one-day conference," District 50 Superintendent Joy Swoboda said. However,

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"the (board) policy does not limit the distance for travel reimbursement."

The seven-member school board is responsible for more than \$34,000 in spending for travel to conferences and other events since the beginning of 2017, according to records obtained by the Daily Herald through a public records request.

That includes two more suburban hotel stays related to one-day events for Hall in April and May, the records show.

Hall was responsible for \$10,560 of the expenses, the most of any District 50 board member, followed by board President



Carla Little

Carla Little at \$9,775, according to invoices. The board's spending included multiple trips to out-of-state conferences and several more in Chicago, Springfield and throughout the suburbs.

Board members and district administrators said the conferences provided valuable development and continuing education for the volunteer board.

"We each bring our own

Board spending

Woodland Elementary District 50 board members have spent more than \$34,000 since Jan. 1, 2017, on travel to conferences. Here's how much board members' travel cost taxpayers.

Terry Hall: \$10,560.45

Carla Little: \$9,775.21

Elizabeth Helgren:

\$4,097.81

Joyce Mason: \$3,924.98

Joe DeRosa: \$3,512.22

Jennifer Haack: \$1,692.32

Christ Schrantz: \$796.06

Total: \$34,359.05

Source: Woodland Elementary District 50

perspective to the office, but we cannot rely on that alone," Little said. "Learning about new laws, new safety measures, new ways to service our parents and engage our community, new curriculum, new ways of teaching students in the bigger sense allows each board member to build upon what he or she knows when first elected."

At recent board meetings, some taxpayers have begun questioning the board's financial oversight and spending practices.

"I am concerned about it because there are so many people struggling to pay tax bills," said Chesney Leafblad, a parent of three children in District 50. "Especially because tax rates and tax levies in Lake County are some of the highest in the nation."

More than \$10,700 was

spent to send five of the board members to Washington, D.C., in early February for a series of lobbying events hosted by the National School Boards Association. Board members from all over the country visit the Capitol and meet with legislators and legislative staff members. Little, who has been a school board member since 1999, attended the same event the year before.

"No matter how long someone serves on a school board, there is always more to learn," Little said. "Topics for conferences change each year, and there are key conferences to benefit board members each year."

Not all board members attend every conference available to them. Hall said she tries to attend as many as possible because she is

"semiretired and so I am more able to get this education and training than some of my fellow board members."

The board has no policy regarding the dissemination of information gathered at these conferences. Hall said she briefs board members on events she attends "as needed or as requested."

"While no formal report is required, board members share the information they learned during board meetings and they use their experiences at conferences as reference points when discussing related topics throughout the school year," Swoboda said.

Board members said they were unaware of any concerns about the board's spending. Swoboda said the topic has been broached in recent budget discussions.

"When the district engaged in budget reduction measures in 2017, 2016 and 2015 there were occasional comments to the administration and school board about considering reducing costs for travel, conferences and workshop attendance," Swoboda said.

However, no specific action was taken by the board, she said.

Got a tip?

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