

LMC board ponders where to find its next president

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BENTON TOWNSHIP — Lake Michigan College's Board of Trustees will soon decide if they need to launch a national search to succeed outgo-

ing President Bob Harrison or look more closely at their only internal candidate.

LMC Board President MaryJo Tomasini said she expects the search to get into gear over the next couple weeks, after em-

ployees finish meeting with Clinton Gabbard, vice president of student affairs.

"We've wanted this to be a transparent process, and wanted everyone to feel that they've had a voice, and they've been

listened to," she said.

The college hosted one public forum for Gabbard last Tuesday. He is the only internal candidate to declare interest in succeeding Harrison, who's retiring Dec. 31.

Harrison served on an

interim basis until the board named him permanently to the president's job in 2009.

"In all honesty, the last internal candidate was 30 years ago, other than Bob," Tomasini said, following last week's board

meeting. "Anything you do 30 years later is completely new."

Gabbard had a similar position for seven years at Walla Walla Community College in Walla Walla,

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Wash., before coming to LMC in 2011.

Prior to those experiences, Gabbard spent nearly a decade as Purdue University's director of counseling and psychological services, and four years at the University of Notre Dame's counseling department.

His wife, Ronda, is a music teacher at Mars and Sylvester elementary schools in Berrien Springs. She's worked there for three years.

Gabbard said he sees his diverse background as a good fit for the president's job.

"No one should ever work at a community college if their aspiration is to make it to the university setting because this is an exciting place to be, in itself. So many people say to me, 'I started at a community college,'" he said.

Gabbard has played a high-profile role in many of the college's current projects, including the completion of Beckwith Hall, its first student housing complex.

Gabbard's Walla Walla background is also credited with helping LMC in finding and hiring Michael Moyer as director of its newly created Great Lakes Wine Institute, which starts this fall.

About 30 people attended last week's session, where Gabbard spent an hour taking questions on everything from his management philosophy to his views on ensuring student success and how community colleges can thrive in a static funding climate.

Responding quickly is a hallmark of any strong leader in a community college environment, where change is the norm, Gabbard said.

As an example, he cited the initial struggles LMC experienced with the Promise Zone program – which the state set up in several areas, including Benton Harbor, to help academically under-prepared students get a chance at a college education.

However, after seeing students leave as quickly as they'd arrived, LMC realized it was time for a different approach, Gabbard said.

Gabbard worked closely with people like Doug Schaffer, LMC's mens' basketball coach and admissions director, to boost its level of mentor outreach and support services so it could eliminate the problems that prevented students from succeeding, he said.

"This project was a labor of love, but it was also a labor of, 'We can't bring people into our community college and treat them as if they should just learn to swim on their own,'" he said.