

By Chris Neidenberg

Following an emotional outpouring of support and much wrangling, the board of education Sept. 15 unanimously proposed naming PS # 34, "the last district school," not named after a person, after President Barack Obama

The board's vote came after two separate groups comprising a total of at least 80 people, including students, gathered around the podium with speakers. Many carried posters with messages urging support.

Their overwhelming presence, in audience seats that evening, led to a standing room only crowd at Martin Luther King MS #11.

They pleaded with the board to propose naming the facility after the nation's first African-American president, set to leave office in just over four months, concluding his second term.

A final adoption vote is set for the board's Oct. 20 meeting.

The push comes after some proponents first tried naming the new PS #20 after Obama, but the Ocean Avenue site was ultimately christened in honor of famed black poet Maya Angelou.

In trying to calm the waters, after hearing all the speakers, Board President Vidya Gangadin pledged, "We will work through it and come up with a good decision, which, I'm sure the community will be happy with."

The Obama resolution, somewhat controversial, follows a process dating back to at least the last school year. That's when a board faction, led by Trustees Gerald Lyons and Lorenzo Richardson, pushed naming the Kennedy Boulevard site after Board Member Marilyn Roman.

The longtime city educator and former acting mayor taught in the building before becoming a district-wide administrator. The final decision was deferred to the 2016-17 school year.

Joining the fight was a former student of Roman's at the school, African-American Monique Andrews, who insisted the issue was "not black versus white."

But Andrews was the lone voice speaking in support of Roman that night.

In response to the outpouring, Board Vice President John Reichart first moved a resolution to make naming the school for Obama a priority that evening - after it seemed a board majority originally wanted Roman.

Ultimately, Lyons withdrew his motion in an act of unity. He and Richardson sided with the board's seven other members: Gangadin, Reichart and Board Members Roman, Ellen Simon, Jessica Daye, Joel Torres and Micheline Amy.

Joining Angela McKnight in pushing for Obama was City Council President Rolando Lavarro. Both officials made emotional appeals in stating the case for naming the site, in a heavily African-American neighborhood, after the nation's first African-American president.

"I want to cry," said McKnight, in reacting upon seeing the resolution favoring Roman was originally on the table

In insisting Obama was the perfect role model for the building's student population, McKnight said her proposed naming represented a commitment "to stand for the students of PS #34."

"I'm sorry some of the board members don't want to do it in favor of the last school (without a name)." McKnight, active in leading a mass petition drive, told trustees. "I'm mad and offended you want to go against this tonight - right here."

Lavarro cited a list of reasons warranting Obama and heralded the grass-roots movement which coalesced in favor of the president.

"The (school's) children, parents and staff - they are all the vast majority as you can see from the support," he said.

Yet Lyons claimed that when he first made the suggestion two years ago, "I don't think anyone had a complaint."

Citing his first running on a ticket against Roman in 2012, he recalled making clear during a candidates' forum that, even so, Roman "was the most qualified person to serve on this board."

Richardson, an African-American, also insisted Roman was an outstanding choice.

"This is not about selling out," he said of his initial support for her. "This is not about being disrespectful to anybody."

McKnight assured the push was not targeted against Roman, agreeing she has rendered distinguished service to the city - but that Obama was the more appropriate choice under the circumstances.

Roman told the audience it was not an important issue to her personally

"Let's stop all this nonsense on a non-issue," she said. "If you want to have a name, then have a name."

Other board members, including Amy and Simon, commended McKnight's group for helping affect the change - within the board's parliamentary rules.

"I want to thank all the parents and all in the community who came out tonight," said Simon. "I commend you, and I commend you for being so well spoken."

Amy agreed, saying, "To the PS #34 community, we'd love to see you coming out here more often."