Florida Atlantic University finalist for President Mary Jane Saunders, provost and senior vice president for academic affairs at Cleveland State University, speaks with faculty and students Monday afternoon during a question and answer meeting on campus.

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Florida Atlantic University selected Mary Jane Saunders, provost of Cleveland State University, as its sixth president Wednesday evening by a unanimous vote of the 13-member board of trustees.

"This institution is just poised for greatness," Saunders, 59, said at a welcome reception on FAU's Boca Raton campus Wednesday night. "I'm very eager to get involved right away."

Former President Frank Brogan left FAU in September to become chancellor of the state university system. Since then, John Pritchett, who was provost under Brogan's leadership, has been serving as interim president, and he will go back to his title of provost when Saunders starts as president. That date has not been set.

"Philosophically, (Saunders) and I are on the same page," Pritchett said.
Supporters described Saunders as a consensus builder, a trait that may be particularly valuable at a university where relations between the faculty and Brogan were often tense.

"I was really impressed with her management style," said trustee Chairwoman Nancy Blosser, who led Wednesday's deliberations following a round of 90-minute interviews with Saunders and two other finalists. "I heard a real balance in her appreciation for faculty, staff and students. Especially with our situation, that's very important."

Saunders said the observations are accurate.

"People talk about universities as bottom-up institutions, and you have to honor that," she said.

During the deliberations, Saunders and Wichita State University Provost Gary Miller rose to the forefront while University of Central Florida Provost Terry Hickey called to withdraw his application. Many board members said Hickey lacked "enthusiasm" for the position, a reference to the fact he had previously announced at UCF that he was planning to retire from education this summer.

Saunders is not a complete stranger to Florida, having spent the bulk of her career at the University of South Florida, where she was director of the institute of biomolecular science from 1993 to 2001. She has been at Cleveland State University since 2003.

In her final interview Wednesday, Saunders called FAU a "teenage institution" in its growth process compared to other universities across the country.

"I think this institution is like a student going off to college, making those decisions now about where you'd like to be," she said.

She said a priority would be turning FAU into more of a residential campus, which begins with the creation of more student housing and a football stadium on campus.

"That social piece of athletics is a big piece of university life," she said. "I saw it first-hand at the University of South Florida."

Plans for an independent medical school are also a priority, but she said that before FAU moves forward with that project, the university must figure out what its niche will be.

"It's about what areas of research you can compete successfully at the national and international level," she said.

Saunders also showed her sense of humor when she was asked what a student graduating in 2020 from FAU would say to an incoming student.

"I started here in 2016, finished my degree in four years because all of my classes were available, and I'm going to take my first check and give half of it to the university," she said.