

Taxpayers Warn About Law On K-6 School Merge Plan, by Maria Scandale, Sandpaper, August 1, 2007

It's still summer, and Islanders' thoughts aren't on school, much less the school year three or more years from now. But they should be, says the Joint Council of Taxpayers Associations of Long Beach Island, who point out a New Jersey public law amendment that could drastically affect their pocketbooks.

The law (PL 2007, Chapter 63 amending Public Law 18A and enacted in April, 2007) requires an executive county superintendent of schools to have a consolidation plan in three years to eliminate K-6th and K-8th-grade school districts to consolidate them into K-12 districts. The plan would be put to a public vote.

The Beach Haven, the Long Beach Island Consolidated, and the Stafford school districts are all K-6 districts.

The Joint Council (JCT) is sounding the alarm because the Island pays about 80 percent of the bill for the area's regional school district. Regional school taxes are based on assessed valuation, and Long Beach Island has about 80 percent of the tax base, but sends only 20 percent of the students that attend the existing Southern Regional School District.

To pay an equally disproportionate bill for the very few elementary school students that it would send could raise taxes by \$19.2 million, warns Bill Knarre, new JCT President, along with Peter Trainor, head of a JCT committee investigating the effects of PL 2007, Chapter 63, and Bill Kunz, a member of the committee. "According to the allocation formula, Long Beach Island would be responsible for 76.9 percent of the consolidated K-6 costs, or \$24.9 million," Knarre said in presenting Trainor's research to The SandPaper this week. "That's an increase of \$19.2 million above the current \$5.7 million tax levy." Before that would happen, though, the consolidation question would be put to voters, the law says. Special school elections would be held.

Joint Council members wrote to the state Office of Legislative Services for clarification on the vote approval process. Principal Counsel Anita Saynisch wrote back on May 24, 2007, saying, "The consolidation plan could not be implemented unless a majority of votes in each of the covered districts are cast in favor of the plan. In other words, if the voters in just one of the affected districts do not approve the plan, it could not be implemented."

Joint Council members don't trust that that will hold. The state could amend the section of the education law that determines the adoption of the plan, they say. Chapter 63, says its own language, "encourages government efficiency through shared services." "Wiser people have said, why would the state legislature do this to have it fail?" commented Knarre. "What they would do, and what they've done in the past, is that they would make an amendment to 18A and say the majority vote will carry the thing."

The JCT is well aware that the island is outvoted by Stafford Township registered voters by 6,429 compared to 16,841. But there are 2,801 K-6 students in the three districts (Beach Haven, LBI Consolidated, and Stafford), of which 89.3 percent are from Stafford, according to recent figures. Together, the Island schools have about 301 students and Stafford schools have 2,500.

“If they would try and change the funding formula to make it more equitable for everybody, we would be happy campers,” said Knarre. “We’re fighting because it’s going to cost us a lot more money than we’re already paying, and we’re paying a ridiculous amount now.”

The Joint Council of Taxpayers Associations of Long Beach Island currently represents nearly 5,000 taxpayers. Its purpose is to educate and advise member organizations on any issue that pertains to the whole island.

The JCT leadership has requested a meeting with current Ocean County Superintendent of Schools Bruce Greenfield. Greenfield did not return a phone call to The SandPaper by press time. “We’re trying to educate the people who are coming down here, retiring here,” said Kunz. “These people don’t know this, I can guarantee that.

“If we went today to a meeting of people and Bill were to tell them that we pay 80 percent of the bill for the high school and only send 20 percent of the kids, there would be 40, 50 percent of the people in that room say, ‘What? Are you kidding me? That can’t be,’ said Knarre. “These numbers are real.” Added Kunz, “One of the things we’re looking for, as well, is some more learned people who are close to this, who have a stake in it and don’t realize it, to step forward and say, ‘this is getting out of hand.’”

JCT leaders are also aware that Island homeowners are perceived as rich, but for many, their value is tied up in their property, they say. “We’re talking about \$14 billion worth of valuation on this 18-mile strip,” said Knarre. “There has always been the statement that we’re rich people on Long Beach Island. Let’s take Bill, he built that house in 1984, an oceanfront home, that now is probably in the area of two-something million dollars. But he can’t go down to the Acme, pick up a couple of steaks and go to the cashier and say, ‘my money’s in my house; when I die or sell it, we’ll square up.’”

Eldon Hickerson – LPOA Secretary

SRHS Study

The Preliminary Study To Determine The Feasibility Of Beach Haven And Long Beach Township Withdrawing As Constituent Members From The Southern Regional School District is completed. It is published in full on the Beach Haven Borough web site at:

<http://beachhavenborough.com/pages/104/index.htm>

"Recommendations and Conclusions"

"It is the conclusion of this report that dissolution of Southern Regional is the preferable alternative, and that dissolution is also both feasible and beneficial. However, should a majority of the communities and constituent districts not agree to pursue dissolution, Beach Haven and Long Beach Township should consider the educational and financial benefits that they would enjoy upon withdrawing from Southern Regional, and other economies recommended herein."

"In short, should both Beach Haven and Long Beach Township withdraw from the Southern Regional School District, they will have an opportunity to offer the same educational program, \$17,000,000 less annually than it would cost to stay in the regional district."

Commissioner's Responsibilities

Courtesy of Loveladies Homeowners Association)

Here's a quick overview of who is responsible for which aspects of local government:

1) Mayor Diane Gove:

Police, liaison to fire and first aid, construction codes, emergency management, street lighting, telecommunications administration, municipal court, plus labor negotiations for those departments.

2) Deputy Mayor Ralph Bayard:

Road repairs and Maintenance, (except Long Beach Blvd — which is handled by Ocean County) garbage and trash removal, public building and grounds, sanitary landfill expense, beach erosion, recreation, water/sewer plant operations, maintenance and engineering services, plus the labor negotiations for those departments.