

# Consolidation study a go under protests

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SALTSBURG--Parents and students from this southern Indiana County community cajoled, vented frustration, and even prayed Monday night.

But they were not able to dissuade the Blairsville-Saltsburg School Board from pursuing a study which will look at the feasibility of busing Saltsburg students in grades 7-12 to a proposed consolidated secondary school at the existing Blairsville campus.

By a 6-3 vote following geographic lines, board members from the Blairsville attendance area--President Paul Bell, Ed Smith, Mary Whitfield, George Rowley, Lance Alexander and Michael LaMantia--overruled those from the Saltsburg area--Karen Shusko, Carol Weimer and Dan McGregor--to approve the feasibility study by the district's architectural consultant, HHSDR.

The study also will consider closing the current Saltsburg Elementary School and moving students there to the Saltsburg Middle/High School, which would be reconfigured for grades K-6.

Additionally, Blairsville's Middle/High School would be renovated to accept the extra Saltsburg students, while Blairsville's sixth graders would be reassigned from that community's middle school to the nearby elementary building, making the latter a K-6 school.

Several hundred area residents packed Monday's board meeting, which was relocated from Saltsburg's elementary multi-purpose room to the Saltsburg High School auditorium to accommodate the expected crowd.

More than 30 citizens voiced their concerns about the future of Saltsburg's schools.

Proponents on the board have argued consolidation is necessary to increase efficiency and control future tax increases--in the face of insufficient state subsidies and a projected decline in district enrollment from 2,150 to 1,600 students over the next decade.

But residents have charged that Saltsburg students' safety and energy levels in school will be compromised by extended bus trips of up to an hour in length, including travel in heavy traffic on Rt. 22.

Many also argued that the loss of a high school in Saltsburg will mean a decrease in business and property values in the small town, leading to a diminished tax base.

Bell said the intent of the consolidation study is "to see if the (projected cost vs. savings) numbers are real numbers."

He estimated it would take six months to complete the study. Then, if the board decides to pursue the consolidation, he said it likely would take at least three years before construction could begin on the project.

B-S Superintendent Dr. H. Robert Mencer said the district projects it could eliminate 9 1/2 teaching positions through consolidation of the district's two high schools, while maintaining the current complement of courses. But, if all teachers are retained, the district expects it could offer

23 additional elective courses.

Costs of the consolidation have been estimated at \$12 million to \$13 million for construction.

Added to \$20 million still owed on a previous Blairsville campus expansion, it would increase the district's annual debt service to \$2.1 million, Mencer said.

He added that the district also would spend \$325,000 to supply new uniforms for merged high school athletic teams.

McGregor denounced Monday's consolidation motion, predicting it will be "the pebble that will begin the avalanche that will bury our Saltsburg community."

Coleen Summerson said the board is asking too much of Saltsburg youngsters if it expects them to make a daily trek to Blairsville for classes and extra-curricular activities.

"My kids would get up at 5 a.m. and get home after 10 o'clock (at night) if they had to attend a basketball game in Blairsville," she said.

Some parents said they would enroll their children in an Internet-based cyberschool before allowing them to be bused to Blairsville.

Rev. Steven Wright, pastor of the Saltsburg Baptist Church, said members of his congregation already have begun plans for a charter school for youngsters who don't want to go to Blairsville.

Wright, who has four children, said, "Every child who wants to stay in this town, we'll get them into our school, one way or another."

Kelly Corridoni submitted a petition with 225 signatures she said represent families who will not agree to send their children to Blairsville.

"We have other options," she said, including the Kiski School, a boys' preparatory school just across the river from Saltsburg.

She told the board, "You pick the hall and you pick the band, but....there are 225 children who are not coming to the dance."

Several residents asked why the study will not include other options, including construction of a single K-12 campus at Saltsburg.

While noting he is not an architectural expert, Mencer said he arrived at a rough cost projection of \$15 to \$16 million for a K-12 Saltsburg campus.

Blairsville-Saltsburg School District is planning to eliminate 3 1/2 faculty positions next school year. But property owners still are facing tax hikes of nine mills in Indiana County and 6.7 mills in Westmoreland County to help support a 2005-06 budget of \$24.8 million.

That spending plan passed 7-2 Monday, with Ed Smith and Dan McGregor opposed.

Smith suggested the board could trim more off the budget. McGregor expressed concerns about potential shifts in personnel assignments triggered by the staffing cuts.

According to Superintendent Dr. H. Robert Mencer, the reduction in instructional staff next year would be realized through attrition. "There will be six vacancies through retirements or resignations," he said. "We're only filling 2 1/2 of those positions."

He could not say which academic areas the reductions ultimately would impact, noting there will likely be a "domino effect" of instructors switching assignments. He said the staffing cuts would not result in any curtailment of academic programs.

Mencer acknowledged two mills of the proposed tax hike is to be set aside for boosting the district's capital projects fund. Each mill also generates about \$54,000.

Real estate millage rates would increase to 159.1 mills in Indiana County and to 102.2 mills in Loyalhanna Township, Westmoreland County. The discrepancy in rates is due to differences in the counties' property assessment formulas.

Also Monday, the school board voted 8-1 against opting into the state's Act 72 plan, which offers a share of Pennsylvania's expected slot-machine gambling revenues in return for changes in the district's budgeting procedures and tax structure.

Mencer said, a district consultant advised that B-S over the next five years will need to increase its tax millage more than would be allowed under Act 72, requiring approval in a referendum. McGregor, who was alone in supporting Act 72, said he favors that voter check. "It does offer tax relief to senior citizens," he added of the legislation.

In personnel matters, the school board hired Johnstown area resident Eric Kocsis as business manager, at a salary of \$71,000.

Kocsis is a CPA with the Johnstown firm of Wessel and Company, and has provided auditing services for BSSD. "He's very familiar with the district finances," Mencer noted.

He will replace Cathy Rodgers, who has taken a job closer to her Butler area home.

B-S also hired Rick Artley as the first assistant Blairsville football coach and James Buckles as the third assistant coach.

Shelia Roman resigned as a noon-hour supervisor at the Saltsburg Elementary School.