

**SPRING LAKE** — It didn't take long for Assemblyman Joseph Cryan to figure it out: The people of this community, at least those who attended a forum Tuesday night on school consolidation, are not eager to consolidate.

In fact, they despise the idea.

"I caught the tone here," the Union County Democrat said during the meeting. "I'm not oblivious."

Cryan was invited to the forum in H.W. Mountz Elementary School because he is chairman of the Assembly Education Committee and a proponent of the state's push to drive down property taxes by consolidating some of its 618 school districts.

The issue is a heated one in these parts, where Carole Knopp Morris, county superintendent of schools, has proposed merging Avon, Belmar, Lake Como, Brielle, Manasquan, Sea Girt, Spring Lake and Spring Lake Heights into one district.

"A lot of folks feel very strongly about this, that the school defines their community," Cryan said. "I have a feeling this community . . . is like that as well."

Perhaps his first clue that he was not among fans of consolidation came from Trish Hansen, president of the Spring Lake School board and moderator of the forum.

She showed a PowerPoint presentation portraying Spring Lake and Sea Girt as school districts with low taxes and high test scores that stood only to lose, not to gain, from merging with other districts. If they merged, she pointed out, they would be forced to increase their salaries and benefits to match whichever community in the consolidated district boasted the most generous compensation package.

"I don't see how there are going to be cost savings," Hansen declared.

When she was done, Cryan took the microphone and joked, "I'm trying to figure out where Trish stands on consolidation."

He proceeded to tell the crowd that that combining school districts could save the state \$365 million while ensuring more uniform education standards.

Besides, he said, the state will conduct feasibility studies for each of the 127 consolidation proposals set forth by the 21 county superintendents and will throw out those that do not make sense. Those that pass the feasibility test will go up for a vote next September, so the residents of the affected communities can decide whether to proceed, he said.

His words did not appear to calm the approximately 150 audience members.

"We don't trust the government anymore," said Donna Ayers-Vorbach, 48, of Manasquan. "We are fearful this will be decided by a liberal Supreme Court."

Several others asked, repeatedly, what will happen if even one affected community votes no to consolidation.

"Over, done," Cryan replied. "As my mother would say, period, end of sentence."

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