

Process of consolidation vote begins again for East Alton, Wood River and Hartford schools

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EDWARDSVILLE - After being defeated by an extremely narrow margin in 2015, the process of consolidation for three local school districts has begun again.

At a public hearing Monday evening in the Madison County board room, supporters and opponents of an effort to consolidate the East Alton School District #13, the East Alton Wood River High School District #14 and the Wood River Hartford District #15 into one community unit school district were able to give testimony in front of the regional superintendent, Dr. Robert Daiber. The testimony given was recorded and will be sent to the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) for approval to be placed on a future ballot.

The initiative began with a Committee of Ten collecting signatures from at least 50 residents within the districts who are registered voters.

Arthur "Charlie" Hoffman objected the validity of the signatures collected. He said several names were not the given names of the voters, and stated several of the addresses did not match the voters signing the petition. He filed an objection to the petition, which is now a part of public record. Hoffman and his wife, Linda Hoffman, were strong opponents to consolidation, stating it was being done hastily without a feasibility study.

"It's easy to get the train going down the track by getting petitions, but this plan is not sustainable," Charlie Hoffman said in a public testimony.

His wife agreed with him and cited her background as a college professor as her experience with the Illinois education system model. She said the effort to consolidate due to the East Alton School District's position on the Illinois Financial Watch List would not guarantee the district's financial solvency.

"The Alton School District, the Edwardsville School District and the Triad School District were all on that list as well," she said in her public testimony. "Those are all large consolidated school districts. It doesn't seem to be helping them."

Committee of Ten representative Chuck Johansen said he wanted to see consolidation happen quickly due to the financial woes of the East Alton School District, but most importantly, to match the curriculum of the East Alton School District and Wood River Hartford School District so the students are at the same pace when they enter the East Alton Wood River High School District. Johansen said he was a product of that high school, and saw a lot of the flaws of having two separate feeder districts into the high school during his time as a student teacher following college.

"It's going to be hard for the East Alton School District to get out of the hole after the closing of Dynegy and the other industries leaving," he said following the hearing. "The curriculum is the biggest issue, however. It's better to have a unified district. My kids went to these schools, and I did too. When I student taught at a consolidated district, I saw how great it was for the students."

Johansen also stated taxes would lower by a bit if consolidation was passed. If the districts were consolidated, two superintendent positions would be removed, which would save more than \$300,000. The three school boards with 21 members currently would be lowered to one school district with seven. If consolidation passed, elections for that board would immediately follow.

The Hoffman's agreed taxes would be lowered for the first year, but stated the cost of matching curriculum and the need for additional low and mid-level school administrators would make that decrease temporary for the first year. Charlie Hoffman said the cost of curriculum matching would be as much as \$1.8 million if the curriculum matched one school, and over \$3 million if the curriculum of both districts were changed.

Linda Hoffman said the introduction of Illinois State Learning Standards as part of Common Core would match curriculum. She also stated consolidated districts have different test scores and learning methods, which vary from school to school.

Other residents of East Alton and Wood River spoke for and against consolidation as well. Rita Haines of East Alton said she was for consolidation, because her son went through the district and was not challenged. She believed a consolidated district would have provided more of a challenge for him and would have prepared him for college. She also spoke of her grandson, who was born blind. She said her grandson was not able to receive the services he required from the East Alton School District, and now attends a special school in Jacksonville at the district's expense.

"It's embarrassing," she said. "We have such low standards for our students."

At the conclusion of the hearing, Daiber said the testimony and petitions would be sent to the ISBE for approval. If approved, the ISBE will allow the motion to be placed on a future ballot for the community to again decide.