

# Contesting consolidation: Local school district issues resolution against initiative

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**WOOD RIVER** - For the second time in less than two years, consolidation of three school districts will be on November ballots.

The move to consolidate the **East Alton, East Alton Wood River High School and Wood River Hartford School Districts** will most likely be up for public vote on the November ballots. The **Wood River Hartford Board of Education**, however, issued a resolution at their July board meeting against the measure. **Wood River Hartford Superintendent Pat Anderson** said he stands with the board and agrees "wholeheartedly."

"This is obviously not a collaborative effort between school boards and administrators right now," Anderson said. "I work for the board of education. My stance is their stance. I agree with the board wholeheartedly that something this monumental needs to be considered seriously."

Anderson said consolidations of school districts of this magnitude usually have cooperation between the school districts and elected officials involved with it. He said this measure lacks such cooperation. In order for him to support the measure, he said more cooperation and studying of the effects of such a move must be done.

According to a 2011 study regarding the consolidation of those three districts, the move would not do anything to better any of the districts involved. Many things have changed since the measure was voted down in 2011. In fact, many things have changed since the measure was voted down in April 2015--most notably the addition of the East Alton School District to the **Illinois State Board of Education's (ISBE) "Financial Watch List."** Due to that addition, the measure for consolidation does not have to adhere to the usual two-year wait time for it to be available for public vote.

The Wood River Hartford School District, which is currently enjoying decent financial straits, passed the resolution in part because it does not wish to be included in the measure for consolidation with the East Alton and East Alton Wood River High School districts.

The full resolution reads as follows:

*WHEREAS, in the matter of organizing a new Community Unit School District in the territory comprising East Alton-Wood River High School District 14, East Alton School District 13, and Wood River-Hartford School District 15, the Wood River-Hartford School Board is in full opposition of such reorganization; WHEREAS, the attempt to consolidate the school districts has not been fully studied in regard to the financial, curricular, and overall well-being of the students and staff of the affected school districts; and WHEREAS, to responsibly decide on such an enormous undertaking a full review of projected financial budgets, taxing rates, enrollments, transportation needs, special education needs, building facility needs, and a full curriculum alignment study are needed before such a decision can be made; and WHEREAS, historically, successful school consolidations have been collaborative efforts between existing school boards; and WHEREAS, no joint efforts have been attempted or studied by the present school boards to determine if such reorganization would be of benefit to the students of the affected school districts; and WHEREAS, the time needed to study, collaborate, and determine if the consolidation of the existing school districts is feasible no longer exists before the mandated time to vote; and WHEREAS, because the unknowns and possible outcome of the consolidation could easily incur negative consequences on the teachers,*

*students, and stakeholders of the Wood River Hartford School District, the Wood River-Hartford School Board must show opposition to such efforts to reorganize the existing school districts. NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the Wood River-Hartford School District 15 School Board is opposed to the efforts to organize a new community unit school district in the territory comprising East Alton-Wood River High School District 14, East Alton School District 13, and Wood River-Hartford School District 15, Madison County, Illinois, the submission of such question to the voters in said territory, such election to be held on November 8, 2016.*



**Amy Harding**, a member of both the Wood River Hartford and East Alton Wood River High School boards of education, said she is against consolidation, but does not want to change anyone's vote. Harding was for consolidation when it came to public vote in 2011. She said she was neutral to it when it most recently came to ballot in 2015. This time, she said, the measure has not had enough research to justify its resurgence.

“My problem with it is the process,” Harding said. “We attended the public hearing the **Committee of 10** had. **Charlie Hoffman** presented some very well-written objectives. I was for it five years ago, but after reading some of the objections, and thinking about it, I'm not really for it any more.”

The Committee of 10 was the group collecting petitions from voters within the school districts to put the measure on the ballot. Hoffman is one of the most vocal opposition parties against consolidation. At a public hearing held in June in Edwardsville, the Hoffmans questioned the validity of the petitions collected by the Committee of 10, an objection shared by Harding.

"I'm frustrated by some of the things I was told (by **Madison County Regional Superintendent Dr. Robert Daiber**)," she said. "We have election codes and school codes for a reason. The petitions filed to put this on the ballot were amended and the election code clearly states amended petitions could not be allowed."

Daiber said amended petitions were allowed by the ISBE in this case. He said the issues with the petitions stemmed from a discrepancy in notarizing the petitions. In this case, the petitions were notarized by someone who did not do the circulating of the petitions. This had to be amended by one of those behind the circulation having the petitions notarized, which did occur.

"I don't know why they think it's illegal," Daiber said. "It's clear on the review of the petitions, we could see the mistake. Before they could be sent, they had to be re-notarized."

Harding was also concerned about the role **East Alton Wood River High School Superintendent John Pearson** will play with consolidation. She said the **East Alton Wood River High School Board of Education** recently renewed his contract for a five year extension. Harding believes this extension will allow Pearson to retain his place as superintendent under the new consolidated district if the measure passes.

"He does not have elementary experience, but this assures him the job, because he is the highest paid and has the longest contract," she said.

Pearson himself said consolidation may be the solution to several issues the high school faces with students coming from two separate elementary and junior high curriculum.

"Historically, the elementary districts have had the authority and ability to use own curriculum materials, which are not necessarily the same," Pearson said. "When they're not aligned like that, there are places where kids are at different levels. It's particularly noticeable in math."

Besides curriculum, Pearson said he believes consolidation would have a positive impact on taxpayers, especially in the current East Alton School District.

"I think it actually helps the taxpayers," he said. "Particularly on the East Alton side, it would be quite a lot of dollars saved on their taxes."

Currently, the Wood River Hartford School District has a higher equalized assessed value (EAV) than the East Alton School District. If consolidation occurred, the two districts would share the same EAV as each other and the East Alton Wood River High School District.

“The value is the fact all property owners in new district will have the same assessed evaluation as the high school, which is around \$160 million,” Pearson said. “Obviously, those discretionary fund rates will be lower, because they will have more of a tax base from which to draw.”

When it comes to bonds, however, the possible future consolidated district will not share the costs between districts. The taxpayers of the former district which issued those bonds will be entirely responsible for the payment of those bonds, even after consolidation passes (if it does indeed pass).

Daiber said the tax rate will be entirely up for speculation until a new school board was sworn into office after an April 2017 election. The new school board (if consolidation passes) would be responsible for creating a new budget for the consolidated district and passing a tax levy by December 2017.

“The first task naturally of this new board would be to set a budget,” Daiber said. “The first action after the election is going to be the tax levy, which is going to be due in December. There is going to have to be immediate work on finances.”

The tax rates would most likely be similar to other unit school districts in Madison County, Daiber said. Taxpayers in the district would probably see tax rates similar to those within the Bethalto, Triad and Highland school districts.

Officially, Daiber is neutral on the measure for consolidation.

“In my position, I remain neutral on this,” he said. “I have to facilitate the process along. This is for the residents of the districts to decide upon. They have to make a decision they believe will be best for their kids.”

If consolidation is chosen on the Nov. 8 election, a reorganization committee made of representatives from all three districts will be formed to restructure the districts for consolidation. Consolidation would take place as soon as the end of the fiscal year on June 30. The new unit school district would be in effect as of July 1, 2017, Daiber said.