

Sea Isle parents: Don't even study it

School board will look again at closing community school

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SEA ISLE CITY - The subject of closing or not closing the local school brings parents out in droves to the school board meetings.

It happened again Nov. 20, after word of a vote taken last month reached parents. In October, a school board vote authorized the solicitor, chief school administrator and business administrator to again begin talks with their Ocean City counterparts. The talks are to gather information about the possibility of sending Sea Isle's elementary students to Ocean City and closing the local school.

In an effort to answer some questions before they were even asked at the Nov. 20 meeting, board President Steve Zellers explained the October vote before public comment.

"Each year, the board of education receives numerous questions about the budget. At the last meeting, the board passed a resolution for the administrators to begin gathering information about Ocean City," Zellers said. "The board has, by no means, made a decision about the future of our school. Board members have been told to submit any questions they have to administration, so the information can be gathered."

His disclaimer did not slow down several parents who vehemently oppose closing the school. Parents and board members referred back to a board vote taken in May, to keep Sea Isle City's elementary school open, despite continually shrinking enrollment.

Marita Bretzke accused the board of violating its own action.

"Last year, at the end of the year, the board voted to keep the school open," she said. "Why are you wasting time and energy to look at it again?"

Board member Terrence Libro said he believed the vote last May said the board would not discuss the matter at all for at least three years. "It's ridiculous to even look at it again. It's been less than a year since that vote. It seems like some people here are just trying to back door it."

Board member Robert Smith asked Business Administrator Earl Vassalo to review the records of the May meeting, as his recollection matched Libro's.

Sea Isle City school board does not tape its meetings, but Vassalo said he would check his notes.

Board attorney Will Donio said a school board vote could not limit the action of future school boards, as Libro and Smith suggested.

"Unless it is state statute, a board in one year can not bind the actions of that or any board in future years," Donio said. "In an area such as visiting an issue or gathering data, this board can not bind against future actions."

The May 22 vote came following a feasibility study that had an option of sending all students to Ocean City. The vote was based on the recommendation of then-school administrator Tim Wade, who added the caveat that the board should not consider other options "for three to five years."

The motion itself, made by Libro, was to "keep the school open status quo, as existing now." No timeline or minimum enrollment was set on whether the issue would be revisited in the future. The feasibility study projected the enrollment to decline to 61 students, including outside tuition students, by 2011. Current K-8 enrollment is estimated at 79.

A month later, at the board's June meeting, EIRC Director Charles Ivory made a contradictory recommendation, that the board again consider sending some or all students to Ocean City. The board voted to add a motion to that effect to their agenda, but then voted the motion down. In an August interview, Ivory said he would be bringing the matter back to the school board "in the fall."

"I moved my family here after the May vote to keep the school open three to five years," parent Andy Ferrilli said. "I've never in my life heard of a school board voting to close its own school. Without a school, this is not a community. I brought three children into the district. That's almost 7 percent of the school population. I read six months ago that you were keeping the school open and now you are going to close it? My wife doesn't even change her mind that fast."

"Less than 50 percent of students' families are homeowners here, so less than 50 percent of them have a vested interest in the school," parent Peggy Cunningham said. "Maybe renters do too but they can pack up and leave tomorrow. If I knew beforehand what I know now, I would never have moved to Sea Isle."

School Administrator Stephen Derkoski said he was gathering questions to submit to Ocean City Superintendent Dr. Kathleen

Taylor and her staff. Derkoski did not say what, if any, timeline there was on receiving those answers, but said a meeting between the two districts was scheduled for Dec. 5. The school board meets next at 6 p.m. on Tuesday, Dec. 18.