

School Closing Proposal Hit In Public Meeting

Majority In Attendance Oppose Reductions In Elementary Facilities

The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Board of Education is considering the advisability of closing an elementary school here. To help the Board make such a decision, a public input session was held at Terrill Junior High School last Wednesday night. The message from the public, loud and clear, was, "We don't want any elementary school closed at this time." Close to 600 people attended the input session, and the overwhelming majority were on hand to express opposition to reductions in elementary facilities, reacting either to the closing of a school which would personally affect them, or to the impact district-wide of an elementary closing.

Upon hearing over two hours of comment, the Board announced that it would not make a decision on a school closing at the November public meeting. More public input will be sought.

The citizens raised many points in objection. Vacant land and future development was one. Larry Woodruff of Scotch Plains prepared a map illustrating vacant land on the south side of Scotch Plains, which may eventually be developed for residential use. Woodruff cited the revised Scotch Plains Master Plan, adopted this month by the Scotch Plains Planning Board, which changes zoning from industrial to residential in one portion of Scotch Plains in the Lake Avenue vicinity. This zoning change alone would potentially produce 230 townhouses of up to three bedrooms, Woodruff ventured, with a resultant impact upon elementary population. "In projecting population, you cannot just count the number of kids under five years of age," Woodruff said.

He pointed out that any school closing is a sensitive and emotional issue, and that the closing of any elementary school would affect not only children in that school but children elsewhere in the district, due to a redistribution. If Shackamaxon were closed, it would affect 42 percent of the students now at LaGrande, Woodruff noted.

One after another, citizens argued that more thought and study should go into an elementary closing. Eva Finkel of the Committee of Concerned Citizens asked the Board of Education to consider the possible impact of PATH commuter service and of the recent Mt. Laurel zoning decision, which might bring multi-family housing in areas now zoned for one-family. "Maybe

we'll need an expensive new building proposal in two more years. We're still paying for the last building program, and we'll probably be paying for that mistake for the next ten years. Let's not have to repeat it," Finkel said.

Patricia Kuran, a Fanwood resident who has run for the Board of Education in the past, argued for retention of small neighborhood schools. She claimed to have extensive data to prove that children who are bused out of their neighborhoods do not always adjust well in distant schools, and that their parents do not identify with the schools they attend. "A small school is much more effective in the education of children," she said.

Yetta Boltax, a member of the District Comprehensive Planning Committee, called the Board consideration premature, stating that the D.C.P.C. is working on future school planning and decisions should be postponed pending the committee findings.

Mary Alice Hancock warned that pending state and federal legislation could bring mandated public education for three-to-five-year olds, which would result in greatly increased enrollments.

The input session followed a board directive to Superintendent of Schools Reigh Carpenter to

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School hearing 'will be a wing-ding'

By CAROLYN SKORNECK

SCOTCH PLAINS — "It's going to be a real wing-ding," said Dr. Reigh W. Carpenter, superintendent of schools, referring to tonight's public hearing on the possible closing of one or more schools in the Scotch Plains-Fanwood School District.

The meeting, at 8 p.m. at Terrill Junior High School, will only be a public hearing. No action will be taken.

Under consideration by the board is the closing of Brunner, La Grande or Shackamaxon elementary schools in an

effort to cut costs. Estimated savings would be from \$231,000 to \$287,000 in the first year if one school is closed, according to a report prepared by Carpenter at the direction of the board.

The closing of a school would also entail rezoning the school district and administration, teacher and staff layoffs.

Four of six proposals by Carpenter could take effect next September, but one would cause overly large classes.

The six proposals are:

—Plan A: Close Brunner School. This would require minor, if any, new transportation costs and would involve the

distribution of 674 children to Coles School, Evergreen School, McGuinn School, School One, La Grande School and Shackamaxon School. Projected savings would be \$285,450 the first year, in addition to the property value of the school, estimated at \$125,000 to \$150,000.

—Plan B: Close La Grande School. Carpenter recommended this proposal. Under this plan, 316 children would be redistributed from the oldest and smallest structure in the school district. Projected savings would be \$231,000 in the first year in addition to the estimated \$80,000 value of the property. La Grande School has

been suggested by some Fanwood residents as the new municipal facility for that borough.

—Plan C: Close Shackamaxon School, involving redistribution of 635 children. One of the oldest school facilities, Shackamaxon is the second smallest schools with the second smallest enrollment, the smallest being La Grande. Projected savings would be \$287,500 in the first year plus property value estimated at \$100,000 to \$125,000.

—Plan D: Close both junior high schools, and have grades kindergarten through eight at all seven elementary schools and grades nine through 12 at the high school. The high school now consists of grades 10 through 12. Under this plan, several schools would be at or above enrollment capacity, elementary class size would range from 35 to 55 students and extensive renovations would be needed in the elementary schools to provide science, art, industrial arts and homemaking classes.

Plan E: (not feasible by September) Close a junior high school, assign grade nine to the senior high school and combine grades seven and eight in the junior high.

—Plan F: (not feasible by September) Close one elementary school, send grade nine to the senior high school and keep both junior high schools for grades six, seven and eight.

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develop a study of school closing alternatives. Carpenter had prepared a 57-page study, citing three potential closings which could be realized by September, 1977. The three schools he selected were Shackamaxon, LaGrande and Brunner. He then selected LaGrande as his recommendation, citing the fewest number of students to be disrupted. Since the study addressed itself to three alternatives, the input session brought out parents from all three schools under consideration.

Carpenter opened the meeting by identifying some of the financial considerations which had led to the seeking of a school closing for money-saving reasons. Carpenter predicted that the total school budget could be increased by about \$825,000 next year, under cap ceilings imposed under new state "Thorough and Efficient" legislation. Carpenter foresees numerous increases in obligations, which will necessitate budget increases. He cited higher insurance premiums and greatly increased utility rates. He mentioned inflationary increases of up to 35% for books and materials, higher tuition costs for students at other schools, and higher price tags on contractual agreements for transportation costs.

In addition to increases on budget items already in existence, Carpenter suggested possible improvements for next year. State-mandated compensatory education and elementary in-school lunch programs could add. Recent legislation regarding field trips may lead to budget-financed trips in the future. The district must budget a summer school program into the school budget, since the independent summer school is no longer in existence. State-mandated improvements in basic skills, a supervisory program, preventive maintenance and a possible driver education program are further items which could add to budget totals for 1977-78.

"We could find ourselves considering needs of \$1 million to \$1-1/2 million more for next

year," Carpenter said. Savings realized in closing a school could offset some of the increases, he felt.

Only one or two people in the audience supported Carpenter's position. Ned Waller of Belvidere Avenue, Fanwood said enrollment declines indicate closing of more than one school. He recommended starting a tentative plan for closing a second school next year. Mark Grimley of Herbert Avenue, Fanwood said that assumptions on population estimates are important. If, in fact, we have a declining population, the district might not want to spend its money on a principal and school for a limited number of students.

The possible future uses for a closed school have come under discussion from time to time, particularly in the case of La Grande School, which has been mentioned repeatedly as a potential municipal building for Fanwood. Midway through the hearing last Wednesday, a letter was delivered to the Board from Mayor Ted Trumpp and the Fanwood Borough Council and read. It warned the Board not to jump to conclusions that the school, if closed, would automatically be chosen as the site of a municipal facility. The letter read:

"In your contemplations on the disposal of LaGrande School we wish to state that if the facilities become available we would consider their possible use for a municipal facility. However, the building must provide the desired public safety and administrative functions as well as any others and would not be an uneconomic alternative compared to other options available to us."

"In essence, we believe the two problems are not interrelated and each one should be considered

purely on its own relative merits."

If the Board of Education were to make a decision to close a school, that decision should be made by December in order to plan for the implications in next year's budget.

The closing of Brunner would provide a gross savings of \$285,450; of LaGrande, a gross saving of \$231,000; and of Shackamaxon, \$275,500. However, Carpenter provided some maintenance measures to insure continuation of quality. In order to reduce the number of classes in the 27 to 29 pupil range, he suggested retention of three teachers if Brunner were closed, two teachers if LaGrande were closed, and five if Shackamaxon were closed. He also foresees increased effort directed toward Basic Skills, due to the state "T&E" legislation, and suggests retention of the reading teacher from whichever school would be closed. He would add an elementary art and an elementary music teacher, to bring that total to six. He further suggests a program of "head teachers" to be responsible for elementary buildings when the principal is away. The "head teacher" recommendation represents an educational improvement, and would cost \$400 for each school, or \$2,400 district-wide. The price tags of Carpenter's maintenance-of-staff suggestions depend on the school closed. If it were Brunner, the cost would be \$86,400; if it were LaGrande, it would be \$72,400; if it were Shackamaxon, it would cost \$114,400.

Therefore, the net savings for each of the three school closings under consideration are: Brunner, \$199,050; LaGrande, \$158,600; Shackamaxon, \$161,100.

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