

Two representatives of our group, Nancy Larson and I, met with Education Commissioner Alice Seagren and two of her staff yesterday, and we came away relatively pleased. For one thing, the Commissioner gave us at least an hour of her time and our meeting lasted almost two hours all together. We had a very good discussion about our objectives and found a sympathetic ear from the Commissioner.

She agreed that given advances in technology and ever-tightening budgets, rural schools are going to have to look to innovative means of delivering curriculum effectively and efficiently. She also agreed that many school consultants have a built-in bias towards approaches that line their pockets, which is exactly what we saw with Johnson Controls.

The Commissioner was actually excited as we talked about a feasibility study that looked at new and innovative methods of education delivery, and her staff noted that what we are proposing could be ground breaking. They had some ideas on how such a study could be conducted and expressed a strong interest in working with us to ensure that the study achieves our objectives. They also agreed that a division of the district could make sense, but they wanted any district restructuring to look at bringing other adjacent districts into the mix. We've already begun such discussions with Ely, as most of you know. They also said, and we agree, that any study of a district split would need to demonstrate financial viability for both halves.

Of course, such a study is moot if the district refuses to hold off on construction of the new school outside of Cook. On that point, the commissioner said that the department lacks authority to tell the school district to hold off on the new school. On the other hand, the Commissioner said the Legislature does have that authority and she said the legal counsel that works for the Legislature could, if instructed by legislators, figure out a legal and proper way to put the new Cook-Orr school on hold for 12-18 months to allow for the study.

So at this point, it really is up to our legislators and we need to start contacting them again and telling them we expect them to take action on this issue. For our communities, this is potentially life and death.

I know that this post will likely encourage district supporters to mount their own counter-measures, but I'd like them to at least stop and ask themselves why they are so interested in harming our three communities. We are not seeking to gore their ox. If they think the plan works for their communities, we respect that and support moving ahead in Babbitt, Cherry, and Alborn. What I don't understand is why district supporters and employees won't afford us the same respect. They act as if we don't know what's best for our communities here, and simply refer to us as selfish, sleazy, or stupid. That's just wrong and it disrespects the overwhelming majority of residents in our communities in the north.

On a related issue, we confirmed that there likely is some room for the district to maneuver when it comes to the plan that was approved by voters. On the one hand, I did unwittingly put out some misinformation myself on this and for that I apologize. It turns out that state law does not allow changes from what is specified on the ballot at the time of an election. However, the ballot used in the Dec. 8 election was awfully ambiguous. For one thing, it never called for converting

the Tower-Soudan School to a K-6. It only called for renovations to the school. Department staff agreed that there appears to be no requirement, based on the outcome of the Dec. 8 election, that the Tower-Soudan High School be closed. The school board would have the option to maintain it as long as it chooses to and given the fact that the district's financial situation is nowhere near as severe as previously advertised, there is precious little reason not to maintain it. K-12.

As for the Cook and Orr situation, the ballot calls for construction of a new school to serve the two attendance areas. It does not call for closure of the two existing schools. This would seem to leave a considerable amount of room for alternatives. Here's just one idea. You could build a modest, new school on the south edge of Orr, preferably close enough to town to easily extend utilities. This new school could be smaller in scale, designed to house maybe 275 kids, with a price tag of maybe \$15-16 million. That leaves about \$19-\$20 million for renovations in Cook and Tower. Because we would be looking at renovations, the district could leverage additional federal dollars through the stimulus. That would give us sufficient dollars to really improve the Cook and Tower schools. If the Cook School is too big for current enrollment, either mothball a portion (as they are doing in Babbitt) or look at demolishing some sections to rightsize it.

Such a plan actually makes more sense than what the district has proposed. This idea maintains current enrollment and could actually add new students. School officials have claimed for months that the new schools in Alborn and Cherry and north of Cook would bring back some students who had previously opted for open enrollment. Well, why wouldn't that also work in Tower, Cook and Orr if they had new or substantially renovated schools?

The plan the district is seeking to implement almost guarantees the loss of more than 100 students, and possibly more than 160 depending on what Nett Lake decides to do. That's a potential revenue loss of \$1.1-\$1.7 million a year in operating revenue. By keeping these three schools open, at least \$1.1 million in otherwise lost revenue is recovered. And if new students are enticed by the improvements, it only adds to the financial benefits.

The fact that such an approach prevents major economic loss to the three communities only makes it all the more advisable.

I know that anyone who puts out ideas is subject to potshots in the current environment. But before the district supporters and employees get out the buckshot, I would encourage them to stop and think rationally, rather than emotionally, about this and, if they have objections, make them substantive ones. Don't waste our time with name-calling and the like. If you need to vent spleen, they can go outside and yell at the trees.

As for contacting those legislators, you can contact:

Dave Dill at 651-296-2190 or by email at rep.david.dill@house.mn.

Tom Rukavina can be reached at 651-296-0170, 888-682-3205 or by email at rep.tom.rukavina@house.mn. Tom Bakk can be reached at 651-296-8881.

David Tomassoni can be reached at 651-296-8017.

Let's get to work folks. We need our legislators to understand that the fate of our communities depends on them and we expect them to stand up for us, particularly if they expect us to stand up for them in November.

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