

EDUCATION

County-wide school district proposal meets first wave of challenges

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A local mayor's proposal for a countywide consolidated school district has hit two stumbling blocks in the form of governing bodies in Andover Township and Franklin.

After gaining support in the form of adopted resolutions from Green Township, Sussex Borough and Hopatcong, as well as his own Town Council, Newton Mayor Wayne Levante's consolidated county school system proposal did not fare as well this week at two municipal meetings.

On Monday, in Andover Township, Levante was challenged by Andover Regional Board of Education President Michael Fancher to provide data to support the claim that a consolidated district would yield significant savings for county taxpayers. Fancher said he was "very concerned" about media coverage of the issue that was lacking numbers and details of the proposal.

"Why I'm concerned has less to do with what the topic is and more to do with the fact that I haven't seen any data," Fancher said. "I'm a numbers guy and I love data. I love to look at it, I love to pick it apart. I love to find where it works and where it doesn't. And so far, in these articles that have been written, there has been exactly zero data with the exception of the numbers seven and nine (million dollars), which is the supposed savings that is going to come from this consolidation."

Fancher touched on a number of the potential issues he saw with the proposal, including dealing with union contracts, curriculum, transportation and geography of the county. In contrast, Fancher said real savings could be found by mandating shared service agreements and by altering state laws as they pertain to school purchasing and prevailing wage.

Levante's proposal calls for eliminating individual district superintendents and business administrators in favor of one of each under a single county office in addition to other layers of administration that are found in nearly every one of the county's 25 public school districts. Fancher took issue with that idea as well questioning how two people could perform the work currently being done by 50.

The Newton mayor has been traveling around the county to municipal meetings trying to garner support for the resolution, but also to find willing participants to fund a study that would examine the consolidation issue.

"(Fancher) is mentioning no data," Levante said on Monday night. "The thing is, that's what I'm looking for. I'm looking for a feasibility study that would show the savings compared to what we have now. And here's why we don't have that information -- because none of the superintendents, none of the school boards have provided that information. None of them are looking to do that."

On Tuesday, Fancher, who made reference to studies done on the county solar project and 911 emergency center before those multimillion-dollar projects moved forward, said, " I don't trust the studies. They've been wrong before."

After the two elected officials went back-and-forth a bit and several members of the public, including a former high school teacher and a past president of the Andover school board, gave their thoughts, the committee decided it did not have enough information to either support or reject the consolidation proposal.

"Sitting on the municipal governing body, I think I would have been very upset if I found out that the Andover Regional Board of Education passed a resolution to consolidate municipal government to one county government without first discussing it with us," Committeewoman Dolores Blackburn said. "I would like to meet with (the school board) to get more information about what this really entails before I (make) a decision."

Mayor Tom Walsh said that, at the very least, the committee needed to know how much a study would cost and what, exactly, it would be looking at before it was able to offer its support.

On Tuesday night, the Franklin Borough Council also passed on the option to approve the consolidation resolution following a PowerPoint presentation from Councilwoman Dawn Fantasia. The focus of Fantasia's presentation was the idea of significant savings as a result of a consolidated countywide school system. She, much like Fancher the previous night, said she was concerned about the lack of data in the proposal.

"It seems to be a very interesting idea, a good talking point, but I'm a data person and I don't like when proposals come out without any measurable data behind it," Fantasia said on Tuesday night.

She highlighted several studies that had already been performed in relation to consolidation efforts in the state, each concluding that savings from consolidation was minimal. Fantasia also discussed many of the same issues that Fancher had touched on the night before in Andover, with the addition of debt

service in each school district, which would be shared throughout the entirety of the consolidated district, and reduction in state aid due to the merger of different socioeconomic school groups.

"In summation, I find that there has been no compelling assumptions to believing that consolidation automatically leads to cost savings," she said, "and the empirical studies that I've been reading about consolidation yield overall estimates of cost savings that are relatively modest with the largest percentage of savings occurring from consolidating very small districts."

Levante was not present at Tuesday's meeting in Franklin, but when reached for comment afterward said he was not surprised by the contents of Fantasia's presentation. He said that Fantasia, who is a school administrator at the Bergen Arts and Science Charter School, has a vested interest in opposing the plan.

"I expect her to defend with vigor," he said. "I chalk it up to just another person protecting themselves instead of the taxpayer. The only PowerPoint I will find value in is one done by an independent organization comparing the redundant debacle we have now in this county to the consolidated systems found elsewhere throughout this country."

Fantasia, at the conclusion of her presentation, said she was in support of cooperative pricing agreements and advocating at the state level for how schools are funded.

"The taxpayers are drowning," she said on Tuesday night, "and we know this. We're choking. We're choking our residents from the state level all the way down. So we need to start encouraging consolidation of services, purchasing agreements, of co-ops together. I think that's the best place to start."

Franklin Mayor Nicholas Giordano said the council was not "naysayers" to the idea of consolidation altogether, but that Franklin's economic interests would not be best served by Levante's proposal.

"It goes without saying that everybody up here on the dais would agree that some type of consolidation would benefit everybody," he said. "I still believe that school consolidation is something that will have to happen, along with a lot of other services in New Jersey. However, the first step, as Dawn pointed out, is we need to have an intelligent conversation about what's going on, how we would accomplish it."

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