

Dozens of bills filed over Maine school merger plan

Maine consolidation plan has its detractors, supporters

By **Dave Choate**

dchoate@seacoastonline.com

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School district consolidation has rapidly become the biggest issue confronting the Maine Legislature this fall, with at least 60 bills filed that address the controversial law.

It's little surprise, then, that state legislators and officials have a lot to say about the issue.

Passed in the last legislative session, the law looks to consolidate Maine's school districts in order to save money.

Although they neighbor each other, Maine School Administrative District 35, York and Kittery school districts have all gone in different directions. York looks to consolidate with Ogunquit and Wells, MSAD 35 has enough students to stand on its own, and Kittery has been left at the altar as a school with no partners.

State Sen. Peter Bowman, D-Kittery, said administrative costs for districts have risen at the same time the student population has trended downward, creating an "unsustainable" use of monetary resources. He said decreasing the number of districts will offer long-term savings to help reverse that trend, even if in the short term some districts may see more expenses. "I think when you really look at the data, it is pretty compelling for saying something has to be done," Bowman said. "I think this had to be done."

The senator noted that the original form of the plan, which was attached to the budget, passed by more than the two-thirds vote necessary to carry it.

In Kittery, Democratic state Rep. Walter Wheeler said opposition and support of the plan tends to boil down to the funds involved. He said Kittery has lost considerable amounts of money in the last two years and that he views consolidation as necessary.

Wheeler did say he wished districts had more time to plan and react to the district consolidation law, but acknowledged that the deadline is fast approaching.

Republican Eliot state Rep. Sarah Lewin, representing the town in the region that has arguably contested the consolidation most fiercely, condemned the plan as "ill-conceived, ill-timed and not well thought out."

"The bottom line here is that I don't know anybody who is happy with this. I was quite proud of my school board for sending out the letter (to Lewin and our other representatives)," she said.

Lewin was referring to a letter MSAD 35 recently sent to representatives asking them to back a forced repeal of the law. The district, which serves Eliot and South Berwick, has repeatedly said it fears the financial consequences of merging with another district. The Department of Education has not yet set a date for a meeting between the department, Kittery, York and MSAD 35, and district Superintendent Jeffrey Bearden said he is simply waiting for a date and the legislative session. "We're sort of in a holding pattern there, and I think everyone is. There's a lot of unanswered questions right now," Bearden said.

In York, the district is moving forward with plans to merge with Wells and Ogunquit. State Rep. Windol Weaver, R-York, said he has heard there might be financial incentives for York, which could end up with \$1 million in costs from any merger. "I see all the bills and I think there's going to be a

lot of changes. Even so, I don't think it's going away. I don't think the governor would let it," Weaver said.

York Rep. Dawn Hill, D-York, said while the law will probably not go away, some of the bills are likely to be merged or done away with altogether.

The legislative council will hear individual legislators argue for their bills on Oct. 25, she said. The hearings will be followed by a roughly two-week appeal process when legislators can attempt to plead for bills that have been rejected for the 2008 legislative session.

"You have to understand that when it was passed, it was part of the budget. We need people to be open to the discussion to figure out a way to cut administrative costs, keep taxes town, and keep education up," Hill said.

DOE spokesman David Connerty-Marin said by his count, there are 68 bills dealing with school district consolidation, none of them filed by the DOE. He said there are a few calling for outright repeal of the law, many trying to remove financial barriers and still others that outright support the law.

He added that DOE Commissioner Susan Gendron has been exploring measures that would make mergers more financially acceptable to districts. These include a request to reinstate cost-sharing between regional schools, something currently not allowed within the law.

"I think the general consensus — not among those who want the repeal, of course — is that this is a law passed by two-thirds of the Legislature. It's too soon to be talking about repeals when the law hasn't even gone into effect yet," Connerty-Marin said.

REGIONAL PUBLIC MEETINGS

Residents of Kittery, Eliot, York and South Berwick are invited to a series of public forums regarding school district consolidation. The first will be held on Tuesday, October 23, 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m., at the Shapleigh Middle School Cafeteria. A similar forum in York will be announced later, as well a follow-up meeting during the span of November 13-16.