

Locals divided over school consolidation

Costs and resources are scrutinized

By **David Ramsay**
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SOUTH BERWICK, Maine — Local residents had strong opinions about the pitfalls and merits of school consolidation at the forum on Tuesday evening at Marshwood High School.

The forum was the second of three such forums sponsored by the Community Wellness Coalition of Kittery known as KEYS (Kittery, Eliot, York and South Berwick).

At the outset of the meeting, KEYS coalition director Diane Brandon said that of the three districts SAD 35 is the only one not being required to consolidate; York is proposing a merger with Wells and Ogunquit; and Kittery's proposals to merge with York or SAD 35 have not met with much interest from the other districts.

Some favored the idea of consolidation because it promised to reduce high administrative costs and unnecessary bureaucracy and could potentially direct more money to educational programs.

"It's something that's got to happen," said Eliot resident Jeff Furbish. "I'd like to see more money get back into the classroom by cutting administrative costs." He added that the high level of school budget increases cannot be sustained.

Other participants touted benefits of consolidation such as sharing of resources, decreasing duplication of services such as adult education, less competitiveness, cost savings from group buying and access to what is best in each district.

Some arguments against consolidation were not just about funding or loss of local control.

"School consolidation could mean a loss of community. Each school district has its own culture ...; I fear it wouldn't marry well (if we were forced to merge)," said Paige Farmer, resident of South Berwick and parent of two children in SAD 35 schools.

"It's folly ...; what happens when a high performing school merges with a low performing school ...; you hit a middle ground ...; how can you preserve the quality of education," said Farmer.

Many participants agreed that the law needed changing pointing out that the short time given for districts to plan and consolidate would not bring about the results that the law intended. "You don't just wave a magic wand and see that everything gets better," said Farmer.

"The consolidation would result in a significant short term loss of funding," she said. "We're already looking at a \$1 million loss and there's no apparent way to make up for this loss." Some participants thought that sharing the unique resources of each school would provide an important overall benefit for the region as a whole.

Kittery meeting

On Nov. 6 in the council chambers at Kittery Town Offices, 200 Rogers Road, the Kittery School Committee will meet with Jim Rier, who directs finances and operations with the Maine Department of Education, to discuss finances and options for merging with other districts. The meeting is open to

the public.

SAD 35 petition

The School Administrative District 35 School Committee is seeking volunteers who will gather signatures for a petition that seeks repeal of the school consolidation law.

Three local residents have stepped forward. To obtain a petition, contact Martha Leathe at (207) 439-5778; Susan Pullar at (207) 676-9215; or Ralph Stevens at (207) 384-5013.

Each signature on each petition must be witnessed in order to be valid.