

O.C., U.T. board members worry about Senate b

Meeting tonight on bill that would consolidate education, take away local con

By MARY RUDLOFF

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OCEAN CITY - A bill that passed in the state Assembly and is heading for their Senate counterpart has local school officials worried.

How worried are they? The Upper Township school district is hosting a county-wide public meeting in its Middle School gym at 7 p.m. tonight (Thursday), to discuss and explain the proposed bill. The bill, in its current form, takes all decision making power and control of local schools away from communities and puts it in the hands of a governor-appointed county superintendent.

The meeting's sole purpose is to explain the bill, part of which would establish a county super-superintendent. The key speaker scheduled for the meeting is state Sen. Nicholas Asselta.

Both Ocean City and Upper

Township's boards devoted time at their December board meetings to discuss the proposed bill and the impact it could have on individual school districts.

The bill would create a pilot program for one of the counties in the state. Counties would have to apply, Breckley said, and there are incentives to counties that do. The responsibility or decision to apply for the pilot program, however, does not rest with the school district. Instead it would be in the hands of the county Board of Chosen Freeholders.

"People who are not involved in school districts would be making decisions about running those school districts," Upper board member Audrey Eichenberger said.

Upper Township board president Michele Barbieri said that the bill, as written, could take away the authority

of the local school district.

The one thing that many board members appeared to agree on is that the bill would have little or no benefit for children or education.

"Not one of these bills that have been proposed is in any way relative to education or benefits children in any way," Ocean City board president Richard Holahan said.

The boards were in agreement that school districts and the parents of school children need to put the pressure on the county freeholders against applying for the program.

"In the current state of the bill, things being proposed are not going to benefit children or education," Ocean City member Frank Faverzani said.

The board members said the Senate bill would take away home rule, including programs offered, control over school buildings, what

students attend which school and the public's right to vote on budgets.

Asselta, Ocean City board member Bart Russell said, has agreed to be an advocate for the county's school districts.

"(Assemblyman Jeff) Van Drew supported the bill, and he just blew us off. (Assemblyman Nelson) Albano didn't show up," Russell said of a meeting of the county school board association. "Asselta has volunteered and is out there pounding the pavement, saying this is a bad bill. The bill is all about the dollar and state control. It has nothing to do with education."

Russell said the bill is the state's attempt to honor its commitment to save money and cut taxes.

"And they're going to do it on the backs of school districts," Russell said. "There is no talk about education,

about who will absorb the debt of other districts or what is done with redundant staff members."

The only thing that is clear in this bill, the board members said, is that the governor appoints the super-superintendents, who then run the

schools. Control of local districts, would rest with the school district members."

The 7 p.m. meeting at the Upper Township School gym on Thursday will be open to the public. The public is encouraged to attend.

Bill cuts school board authority, public budget votes

Editor's note: The information contained in this article was gleaned from a copy of Senate Bill S-7.

By **MARY RUDLOFF**

Ocean City Sentinel

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OCEAN CITY - Senate Bill S-7 could change the face of education in Cape May County.

The bill aims to establish a pilot program for a county-wide school district.

In doing so, municipalities in the county would lose control over their own schools.

The proposed county school district would replace the local school districts and boards of education that currently exist.

School districts that would be affected, however, have no say in whether they apply to be part of the 10-year-long pilot program.

That decision, which would impact every district within the county, is put in the hands of the county Board of Chosen Freeholders. The Board of Chosen Freeholders can apply for participation in the pilot program. Local school boards have no part in that decision.

If the bill is approved and

signed into law by the governor, the newly formed county school district would supercede local school districts in all areas, including staff and administrators, programs offered, control and ownership of school buildings and setting property tax rates.

The members of the board in the new district would be appointed by the Board of Chosen Freeholders, rather than elected. Current local school boards would lose all authority. The head of the new county district would be appointed by the governor and would have authority over every county school.

The commissioner of education will select one county from the applicants for implementing the pilot program. The commissioner, rather than the county or local districts, would develop a transition plan for local schools. It would include a schedule for combining contracts and salaries from local districts, moving administrative systems to county levels, assessment of additional expenses to launch the program, examination of existing debt by local districts; evaluation of school facilities and enroll-

ment and of pending litigation affecting the local districts.

Whether a school or entire local district would continue to operate, and what children would attend what school, would fall under the authority of the county.

The individual boards of education of public, vocational and county special services school districts may continue to exist, but only in an advisory role. Upon the establishment of the county school district, each school district's superintendent of schools, together with any other local district-level administrative or supervisory position, would be eliminated.

The new county board of education would consist of governor-appointed county superintendent of schools and four members appointed by the chief elected executive officer of the county or the director of the board of chosen freeholders.

The new county board of education would have the authority to make decisions currently made in each municipality regarding the operation of schools, essentially ending the concept of "home rule" of local schools.

Under the Senate bill, the county board would:

-Employ and dismiss district supervisors, principals, teachers, and staff and fix or alter their salaries and compensation;

-Decide the course of study, or courses offered, in each of the county's schools.

-Set or change local school policy for the management and operation of schools and school property under its control;

The new county board would appoint a district supervisor for each municipality, replacing all current school administration, to oversee operations of the local public schools.

With Senate Bill S-7, local voters would lose any and all say regarding the school budget and its tax rate. Rather than the public vote on proposed school budgets, the county board of education would appoint a Board of School Estimate. The county school board would prepare the school budget for the entire county and the Board of School Estimate would set the appropriate tax rate for each municipality deemed necessary to operate the schools.

EDITORIAL

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Danger! Danger, Will Robinson!

Education consolidation plan should be Lost in Space

We must have just landed somewhere strange on the ship in the 1960s television series, "Lost In Space."

It's an odd world, a place where the government decides to fix the high cost of education by eliminating all local control, consolidating power into the hands of a few, and telling voters to shut up and take it.

Is this Hypocrition 4, a life-less-planet near the Trentonian Cluster? An asteroid, perhaps, passing by the the edge of the Day Old Tuna Fish Galaxy?

Something stinks so ... this must be New Jersey.

"Danger! Danger, Will Robinson!"

We've just taken a look at Senate Bill S-7. A version was approved by the Assembly and S-7 is now before the Senate. (See stories on page A3.)

This plan, with the concept of cutting education costs in a state with so many school districts, appears mainly to be a plan to eliminate local control and turn it over to a combination of the state and county freeholders.

Elected school boards would be advisory at best, appointed officials would rule education in the county, and the public would lose the opportunity to vote on school budgets.

Decisions on where students go

to school, how the education budget is apportioned to the respective communities, and even the administrators and curriculum would be up to the counties.

There is good news, sort of. Even if the Senate approves the bill and the governor signs it into law, it is for a pilot program. Freeholders have to request the state education commissioner choose their county for the program.

We call that good news only because there is one Cape May County Board of Chosen Freeholders and school officials and constituents from throughout this county can besiege the freeholders with the demand to NOT apply to be part of the pilot program.

It may be tempting for any freeholder because the 10-year pilot program gives them so much control over a massive public institution (can you say, "patronage"?), but we believe freeholders would not dare if the people of this county tell them, loud and clear, how they feel.

To learn more, go to the public meeting at 7 p.m. today at the Upper Township Middle School on Perry Road. School officials are worried about this. So are we.

Go to the meeting.