

Sea Isle changes mind on sending students ... again

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SEA ISLE CITY - The on-again off-again decision to enter into talks with the Ocean City School District is off again.

In a split vote, following a long and loud argument, the Sea Isle City school board voted 5-4 Tuesday night not to authorize preliminary discussions with Ocean City's board about accepting Sea Isle students.

In May, a similar vote - also a split decision - ruled out sending all Sea Isle stu-

dents to Ocean City and shutting down the tiny school district. Tuesday's vote was to begin discussions with Ocean City about possibly sending Sea Isle's middle grade students, either in September 2007 or 2008.

The vote did not come easily or peacefully. The meeting was punctuated with arguments, name-calling and board members trying to out-shout each other in support of their own positions.

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At one point early in the meeting, while board member Tom Szczurek was stating his position on the resolution to start discussions, he was repeatedly interrupted by fellow board member Terrence Libro, making comments and slinging insults at Szczurek. When Szczurek called for board President Stephen Zellers to curtail Libro's conduct, Zellers ignored Szczurek's request, instead instructing the board to "just move on."

That exchange set the tone for the rest of the meeting, which included limited sharing of ideas and many hostile verbal exchanges.

The battle lines were clear early in the meeting, with those in favor of beginning talks with Ocean City and those opposing it fighting over every issue that came before the board.

Board member Michael McHale asked the board to explore the possibilities of

sending students to Ocean City. He repeatedly told the board they were not making any commitment at this point, only gathering information they should already have.

"Last week, (EIRC director) Dr. (Charles) Ivory said our seventh and eighth grade students are not getting what they should here, and they could get it in Ocean City," McHale said. "We need to sit down and negotiate with Ocean City, and figure out how to make that transition. We can't keep putting our heads in the sand."

Robert Smith and Libro remained steadfast that the vote taken in May should end any further discussion about Ocean City. Both challenged Ivory's statements to the board about the quality of education at the middle school level, as well as his recommendation to send those students to Ocean City.

Ivory made the recommendation during the June 19 board meeting. The item was not on the agenda at that

meeting and Ivory made his request for a motion to enter into discussions with Ocean City during public comment.

At Tuesday's meeting, public comment - a time for members of the public to state their opinions, but not normally a time for interactive discussion between the public and the board - disintegrated into arguments until solicitor John Armstrong reined in the board members.

District teacher Theresa Arsenault said most of the staff knows that closing is inevitable. She asked the board to not make any changes for the 2007-08 school year, but acknowledged that the district needed to work on a transition plan.

"I think it is important that the board sticks with the decision they made last month, to keep the school open next year, so parents, students and staff can plan their lives accordingly," Arsenault said. "I think we all know that reality is the school is closing at some point, if not by us then

by the state. I think we should take this coming school year to sit down and work out those details on how to close this school."

On Tuesday night, Zellers

ended the arguing by calling for the vote on the resolution to enter into preliminary discussions with Ocean City. McHale, Szczurek, Ellen Ramsey and Joseph Schmidt

voted in favor of beginning the talks. The motion was defeated when Libro, Smith, Zellers, Matt McCullum and Maria Crudele voted against it.