

Consultant paid by firm hired to run Sea Isle district: Keep school open

By **MARY RUDLOFF**
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SEA ISLE CITY - The chief school administrator hired by an outside firm to run the Sea Isle City elementary school plans to recommend keeping the school open another five years.

Tim Wade said he expects to bring that recommendation to the school board next month.

The board is to vote at either of its two May meetings on whether to keep the school open, despite dwindling enrollment, or send their

kindergarten through eighth grade students to Ocean City.

A feasibility study done earlier this year by the Educational Information and Resource Center (EIRC), the firm the school board hired to run the district, showed that in five years the enrollment pre-kindergarten through eighth grade would shrink from its present 81 students to 61 students. Both figures include tuition students from other districts. At present Sea Isle has eight tuition students, paying \$2,800 each. The per-pupil cost for the Sea Isle district is reported to be the

highest in the state, at more than \$35,000 per student.

Wade's comment about his recommendation came midway through a heated meeting April 23 which saw board members, teachers and parents at times yelling at each other in frustration. It followed the public portion of the meeting, where several parents extolled the assets of keeping the district operational and other residents urged the board to send students to Ocean City. (See related story in this edition.)

Following the public session, board member

Tom Szczurek recounted some of the challenges faced by the school district that should be considered in making the final decision.

"In nine months, we have had four chief school administrators, two business administrators, and have been without a Child Study Team for the better part of two months," Szczurek said. "The children here haven't had a full quality staff to work with. They are qualified people, but the children should have been receiving more services than they are

Please see Sea Isle School, page A5

Sea Isle School

Continued from page A1

receiving.”

Szczurek also listed necessary capital improvements needed on the school building itself, which are expected to cost in excess of \$2.2 million, and an anticipated turnover of staff members and board members as reasons other options should be considered. He said waiting for possible “incentives” offered by the state before making a decision, as Wade recommended, was not practical, as sending the students to any other school district would exceed those incentives through savings.

According to the feasibility report, Szczurek explained, sending the K-8 students to Ocean City would result in a property tax reduction of at least 30 percent.

Szczurek was interrupted several times by board member Terrence Libro, a proponent of keeping the local school open. As the discussion degenerated to a shouting match between the public and board members, board solicitor John Armstrong cut off the discussion.

Tuesday’s meeting also brought out county Superintendent of Schools Dr. Albert Monillas. Monillas urged the board to make a decision. He reminded them that, when he first addressed the issue in February 2006, he recommended the board spend the present school year researching and making a decision about the school’s future.

“It dismays me to find out that the conversation is just beginning,” he said. “It surprised me to hear the feasibility study included other districts for K-8, besides Ocean City, because you can’t get out of Ocean City, whether you think so or not. Your only options are send K-12 to Ocean City or say, come hell or high water, you’re staying here.”

Monillas first spoke to the board last year when budget-

ary constraints left the school board unable to fund hiring administrators. At that time, Monillas recommended hiring of EIRC for a “one year period of transition,” which was to be the present school year.

EIRC had public meetings on April 16 and April 23 to present the feasibility study results and to allow the public to “brainstorm” about the benefits and detriments of each possible solution.

Wade is a paid consultant for the Educational Information and Resource Center (EIRC), the Sewell-based group hired by the local board of education in July 2006 to run the administrative functions of the school district. He was the original CSA placed in Sea Isle last July, but resigned a month later. He returned in early March following the resignation of EIRC’s third CSA in Sea Isle, Warren Benedetto.

Wade is also one of three people hired by EIRC to do the feasibility study. He is to leave the district again on Aug. 31.

Wade said Tuesday night that he does expect more meetings with the public on the issue. He said after weeks of trying to schedule a meeting, a first meeting between him and Ocean City Superintendent Dr. Kathleen Taylor is set for Friday. He said it was not likely that there would be time for any Sea Isle and Ocean City board members to meet together before the vote in May.

“It’s about time we make a decision here, because we can’t continue with this maybe-maybe not,” Wade said. “I have to operate on the basis that we will be here in September.”

Wade said he would bring the issue to the board for a vote at one of its two May meetings. The meetings are May 22 and May 29, beginning at 6 p.m. They are held in the school library and are open to the public.