

# Sea Isle keeping students

## District to remain open for preK-8

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Ocean City Sentinel

SEA ISLE CITY - In a split decision, the Sea Isle City Board of Education voted to maintain the status quo, keeping the city's tiny school district open and operating indefinitely.

While routine business was dealt with quickly, the school's future was the single issue that did not appear on the meeting's agenda Tuesday night, but brought out a crowd of nearly 50, many of them teachers and parents. It came after each board member was given the opportunity to state their position on whether to keep the district open or send the students to a neighboring district.

There were frequent hostile verbal exchanges between board members, acting chief school administrator Tim Wade and audience members. Wade works for EIRC - Educational Information and Resource Center - the agency hired to run the school district this year. He was also one of the individuals, hired by the city, who wrote the feasibility study used to help determine the school's future.

District teacher John Richardson, who said he was speaking on behalf of all of the school's teachers, said he was not trying to influence the board's decision, but urged members to keep the tenure, loyalty and service of the teaching staff in mind.

Wade then gave each board member a few minutes to explain their position. Seven of the nine chose to do so. (See related story in this issue.) While all noted the quality of the teachers in Sea Isle, the division between those who looked toward Ocean City and those working to keep the school open was quickly evident.

Board member Maria Crudele and newly elected Joseph Schmidt declined to com-

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ment.

The options thrown about were not limited to students staying in Sea Isle or going to Ocean City schools. Board member Michael McHale suggested sending fifth through eighth graders to Ocean City, and entering into an agreement to have Ocean City run Sea Isle's school for pre-kindergarten through fourth grade. A key part of that plan, he noted, would be to end the relationship with Wade and EIRC.

Wade immediately noted that such an arrangement would be difficult.

"While it looks really practical on paper, it is less feasible in reality," Wade said. "The reduction in the number of kids, with the largest numbers you have in sixth, seventh and eighth grades, makes it not realistic."

Several parents said they would be supportive of that type of arrangement, if possible.

Making a plea to keep the school open, parent Lisa Iannone sobbed as she implored the board to not close the school. She recounted a story of a school-wide ceramics activity as an example of school unity that would be lost if students were sent to Ocean City.

Iannone said she took the time to tour Ocean City schools, with the possible merger looming. She began crying again while explaining her understanding of how parents are not permitted to be in the Ocean City schools, as they are in Sea Isle.

"I took a tour of Ocean City. I had to go see what we are fighting against," Iannone said. "Parents are not allowed in the school there (Ocean City). I asked. I was told they are not allowed to be in the schools. That school doesn't have the heart this school has."

Resident Joanne McAndrew asked Wade and the board what has been done to improve Sea Isle's school, in efforts to make it more viable.

"I think very little has been done to improve the school," Wade said, criticizing the board that hired his firm. "There are thousands of things that can be done."

Wade's remarks were immediately met with anger from a usually unruffled McHale.

"We brought EIRC to come in and do those creative things," McHale shouted, rising to his feet. "If they haven't been done, you failed, EIRC failed, because EIRC was brought in to do that."

Wade said that EIRC could not fix in six months "what went bad in 10 years."

Wade encouraged the board to vote Tuesday night, during the workshop meeting, rather than wait another week to make their decision. He said that, should the board vote to close the school, conversations with Ocean City would have to ensue to work out the details.

"Ocean City preferred to negotiate this superintendent to superintendent. (Ocean City Superintendent) Dr. (Kathleen) Taylor said taking Sea Isle's teachers would be a hardship on their case, because they are facing reduced enrollment and laying teachers off themselves," Wade said. "But both solicitors agree Ocean City would be legally obligated to take the tenured teachers."

Wade said Taylor explained in discussions earlier this month that Ocean City could take the students in September 2007, but that Taylor would prefer to wait until September 2008, if the Sea Isle board voted to close.

Terrence Libro made both the motion to vote, and then the motion to keep the school open, both seconded by Crudele. All nine board members agreed to make the vote Tuesday night. The vote to keep the school open "status quo, as existing now" was split, six in favor and three against. Libro, Crudele, Steve Zellers, Matt McCullum, Robert Smith and Joseph Schmidt voted to keep the doors open. McHale, Tom Szcurek and Ellen Ramsey voted to send students to Ocean City. The results were met with applause by the parents and teachers in the audience.

No timeline or minimum enrollment numbers were set as to whether the issue will be revisited in the future. The feasibility study projected the enrollment to decline to 61 students, including outside