

A MARRIAGE PROPOSAL

By Mari Detrixhe

A joint public meeting of the USDs 334 and 224 school boards on Thursday the 17th was taking shape as late as 3 p.m. that afternoon. This “emergency meeting” at the Clifton-Clyde High School cafeteria included a presentation by Donna Whitteman, attorney for the Kansas Association of School Boards (KASB). The subject was the proposed marriage (consolidation) of the two districts. Was this to be a shotgun wedding?

Going into the session, many were concerned, particularly about the “emergency” nature of the meeting and the newness of the proposal. But by the end of the first hour, the session was civil and reasoned with all parties asking questions and exploring the idea of consolidation.

Saving money is the reason for considering this proposal, Superintendents Roger Perkins and Brian Pekarek told the group of 37 which included the two school boards; teachers, staff, and administrators; site council members; and patrons. Districts that consolidate can freeze their state aid per pupil at present rates for five years. Otherwise, the districts will face cuts of at least \$157 per pupil next year.

“Most people in Clifton and Clyde had not heard about this two weeks ago.” Justin Steinbrock remarked. “Why? Why now?”

Pekarek said his resignation triggered this event. The two superintendents had been talking about this possibility for a couple of years, but with Pekarek’s resignation to take a position in Iola, they perceived an opportunity for the districts to share a superintendent.

The State encourages consolidation with incentives. Last year, ten districts become five, Whitteman told the group. If districts have 200 or more pupils or if three or more districts consolidate, they are able to preserve their current state aid per pupil for five years. As district enrollment drops below 200, the incentives are reduced. The State wants districts to consolidate while they are healthy.

The state currently pays districts \$4,012 per pupil, plus financially beneficial adjustments for students “at risk”, transportation costs, and other factors. Base aid is predicted to drop another \$75 per pupil this year, and at least \$157 per pupil next year. The Clifton-Clyde school district budgeted for these cuts at its March 7th board meeting, a \$124,000 cut in the district budget.

If the districts consolidate this year, they will freeze state aid at \$3,937 per pupil (minus the \$75) which will produce a savings of \$475,000 at USD 224 and slightly less at USD 334, the superintendents explained.

At the end of five years, the consolidated district would receive the state aid per pupil in effect at that time. Because the State of Kansas is prohibited from operating with a deficit, if the revenue is not there, the state must cut budgets and education funding is one of the largest.

Board member Deb Ohlde noted that the Legislature is considering a complete overhaul of the system. “If they do, will the 5-year guarantee hold?”

Whitteman said yes, the state sets this money aside before distributing state aid to the districts. However, to stop the drop in state aid at \$3937, the districts must act by June 30th. If not, they will face the next round of cuts.

“The hard reality is that 75-80% of a district’s budget is personnel,” Whitteman reminded the group. In the last year or two, USD 224 has “absorbed” a physical education instructor and counselor position which means existing staff is taking on those responsibilities.

“There is a danger in cutting programs,” Whitteman said. “If critical programs are cut, parents may pull their kids and move them to a different school.” Open enrollment is a state mandate, and it places a tremendous burden on the districts to do the right thing. Board member Deb Ohlde wondered, “If parents don’t like consolidation, would they pull their children out of the system?”

The Clifton-Clyde school district will likely begin a period of increasing enrollment starting this next year, observed Clyde’s economic development director Mari Detrixhe (this reporter). “Incoming classes are larger than graduating classes.” She highlighted the large number of young adults now in our communities and the opportunities for growth. “So take a deep breath and consider this carefully. We like our neighbors to the south, but does this make a good marriage?”

What happens in consolidation?

“Both boards enter an agreement to consolidate,” Whitteman explained, “and they determine how to elect the required seven members for the new board. At the end of one year, those board members will be up for a public vote.”

All positions in both districts are terminated on the day the two districts go out of existence, but contracts usually are offered the same day. Whether all get rehired is up to the interim board. Tenure could be negotiated.

The consolidated districts would have one superintendent, a reduction in administration personnel. However, Pekarek is also the Pre K-8 principal for Clifton-Clyde. The schools in Glasco, Miltonvale, and Clyde all have a principal. It is probable that the Clifton schools would need a principal, too.

Is locking up state funding for five years the biggest benefit of consolidation?

Whitteman replied that restoring curriculum and services is a benefit. “Kids like this, having more services.”

Kieran Wurtz, a 5th grade teacher in the Republic County school district and a Clifton resident said that teaching in a consolidated district is good, “But logistically, I don’t know about this.” Board member Dean Michaud echoed his remark, “Physically, I cannot see this.”

“In five years will Southern Cloud still be a separate entity?” asked Wurtz. Frank Brownell, USD 224’s board president, asked a similar question: “Could we operate like Barnes-Hanover-Linn (which maintain separate facilities)?”

“That is a board decision – if you have enough kids and enough money,” Whitteman responded. She said Axtell-Burns-Summerfield, “a district shaped like a dumbbell”, consolidated in the 60’s and has maintained two high schools and separate identities since. The Bern-Wetmore-Sabetha-Summerville district has not closed any buildings in two years. “However, most new districts begin to develop a new identity after the first two year.”

How will consolidation affect athletics?

USD 224's athletic director Ken McClanahan explained that if there are separate high schools, the competition levels are based on enrollment by building.

"If we're in reasonable condition, what's the hurry?" asked Jody Sipe. "If we have shored up enough for next year, what's the rush?" added Wurtz.

"Our district is not in dire straits," board member Renay Branfort told the group. "This is not a necessity. Compared to other districts, we're healthy. Southern Cloud, too. But we have to look down the road ... When Cuba-Agenda went the other way, we were kicking ourselves for not being ready for this."

Perkins expressed a fear of some that the larger surrounding school districts will try to pick off portions of the smaller districts and rural areas we'll lose buildings and representation on school boards.

To consolidate this year, the two districts must hold an election by June 30th, and public notice must be given 21 days prior to the election.

"We need to do what's best for the kids," Wurtz commented, to which USD 334 board president Mat Martin replied, "Some think what's best for kids is to be in a small town, to maintain some semblance of an education facility in each town. If USD 334 is swallowed up by Clay Center or Concordia, I am afraid we would lose our buildings."

"What is hard for me – most unnerving – is that we won't know what a new board would do," Ohlde told the group.

"Perhaps we need a prenuptial agreement," Wurtz suggested.

Martin concluded, "This issue may open the public's eyes to the magnitude of the state funding cuts. They may see that it is worse than we thought." USD 334 board vice-president Dean Revell added, "We need to educate the public and let them know what is going on."

The district will hold another public meeting on this subject at the Clifton Middle School auditorium on Wednesday, March 23rd, at 7 p.m.