

One book closes, another opens

News from Augusta

Senator Dennis S. Damon

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As we close the book titled, 2007 and open the next volume in the series we often pause to reflect on our last read as we anticipate our next one. So, it is with me.

For me one of the most necessary and at the same time most troubling chapters I read in 2007 was titled, "School Consolidation." The chapter commissioned by Governor Baldacci and written by Department of Education Commissioner Susan Gendron et al, with ghost writers including David Silvernail lays out the scenario whereby the numbers of local school districts are dramatically reduced from roughly three-hundred to approximately eighty.

Let's be clear, the need for K-12 education spending is important. However, with education and healthcare constituting the two largest expenditures, totaling 83 percent, of the state's 6.3 billion dollar biennial budget and with K-12 pupil enrollments predicted to decline by 30,000 students by the year 2012 and with the people's referendum mandating the state pay 55 percent of the cost of that education, I believe that set of circumstances is at best unsustainable and at worst catastrophic. Is education important and do I think it ought to be a priority? You bet it is and I absolutely do.

The necessity of getting our financial house in order, of spending only what we can afford and of getting the best bang for every buck we spend is also important, and I think it ought to be a priority, too. That is precisely why I would not and did not criticize the consolidation plan when it was first published. I knew it needed some work and I was confident that our local school officials would be able to work with our state education officials to make the idea palatable even if it was not tasty.

Much of that work has been done. There have been literally thousands of hours spent by local school officials and leaders around the state in an effort to satisfy this idea. I have relied on that work and have hoped it would result in products that would result in savings while retaining all that is good with our current education system.

Thus, as I close my copy of 2007 and reflect on the "School Consolidation" chapter, I am deeply disappointed. I had hoped there would be savings realized in administration reductions. I had hoped there would be additional savings realized as individual schools and school districts found ways to stretch their budgets even further. That is precisely why I voted to support this effort as it appeared in the Governor's last budget submitted to the Legislature. It is therefore with great frustration that I am left with no other acceptable choice than to withdraw my support for this worthy effort. It seems now that in spite of the tremendous efforts of so many dedicated people the projected savings do not exist, in fact many communities are facing significant cost increases if they comply, and the state seems more intent on bludgeoning local schools into submission than on seeking solutions that may be outside the Department of Education predictions.

It is now time for me, for all of us, to open our new book conveniently titled, 2008 and thumb through its pages with new hope, optimism and wonder. The first chapter I find is titled, "Maine's Future Prosperity." I am reading it with great expectations. I see it includes sections on Business Climate, Education and Workforce Development, Transportation, Energy Policy, Quality of Place, Innovation, Healthcare, Government Spending and Taxation, and changes in Legislative Process. I hope you will read along with me and join the movement to define and maintain Maine's course to the prosperous future we all seek.

As always, please do not hesitate contacting me if you want or need to. I wish you a Happy New Year!