

Guest column**Valley school consolidation****By Rep. Ken Theriault**

School district consolidation has been met statewide with mixed reactions.

Some people hate the whole idea, others think it could work with some changes, a few others think it's just fine.

That is no surprise given the diversity of our state.

But our area is affected differently by school district consolidation than most other areas in the state.

Supporters and opponents alike have spoken to me about the problems we face both in the County and here in the Valley.

Our school districts are geographically larger and less populated than the school districts in the south, and many of the "solutions" school district consolidation offers them do not apply to us.

As a member of the rural caucus, I am working with a group of my legislative colleagues from rural areas to address the problems we face with respect to school district consolidation.

We are addressing the questions that have come up in rural areas as one voice, but with full recognition that each region in the state has its own set of issues.

Things are bigger up here.

Aroostook County covers 6,672 square miles and almost 90 percent of that area is covered by

forests.

When we drive down the road, we have spotty cell phone coverage at best, even with the efforts of the ConnectME program.

We are as rural as it gets and that makes school district consolidation a different animal for us.

Governor Baldacci's office has estimated \$36.5 million in savings if we consolidate school districts throughout the state.

The changes are supposed to make Maine's system more efficient and, therefore, more cost effective while maintaining the quality of education.

These estimates and assumptions come from the southern end of the state where cities have multiple representatives, and there are no unorganized territories.

They have introduced an urban plan to a rural area, and expect it to be the right solution.

I am not so sure.

Some of the issues that need a rural answer are the distances between schools and the differences in schools with respect to each community.

Additionally, as we work out cost-sharing issues, it seems that some towns will benefit and some towns may actually be hurt.

The (geographically) smaller districts talk about the benefit of having access to more sports programs through other schools, but

their districts do not have hundreds of miles between schools that offer basketball and schools that don't.

I also know people who returned to the Valley because our school systems do not have the troubles larger cities' systems have.

Our schools are part of a community center - a center that is something entirely different for our small towns.

I am encouraged by the recent work done on a bill aimed at addressing financial barriers that

arose because of geography and other issues.

These were issues that were apparent very early on, and a bill was submitted to address those issues immediately.

The quick work on that bill gives me hope as we still need to talk about employee contract issues and the realities of cost-sharing.

We need to ask for changes that are appropriate for us.

It is good to know that both the commissioner and the members of

the Education Committee are open to listening, because I am going to be asking a lot of questions.

I encourage you to contact me and let me know what your concerns and suggestions are on this issue.

You elected me to represent your interests in Augusta, and I hope you will contact me about this issue.

You can reach me at home at 728-4526 or by e-mail at kent23@verizon.net.