

School consolidators consider what-ifs

By Elizabeth Deprey

FRENCHVILLE - Only 17 of the more than 50 representatives on the Reorganization Planning Committee attended the Feb. 19 meeting.

The group continues to move forward with planning for the law-required school consolidation.

The first part of the meeting again consisted of three working groups, focusing on cost savings, cost sharing and contingency plans. The contingency plan group, which was working on what to do if one or more municipality voted down the referendum to form a Regional School Unit, has language that the committee will vote on at the next meeting, Feb. 26.

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The cost-savings group will write where money will be saved and where costs will go up in their portion of the plan.

The cost-sharing group decided they would like to have some recommendations in the plan on what to do if a school is to be closed.

All three groups completed their tasks and spoke about school closures before the hour was up

for group work, showing that the possibility was on many people's minds.

A recommendation from the group was to allow a community to decide whether to close the school, but not face any financial repercussions if that school was operating at or below the government funding level and was voted to stay open. Some questioned whether that followed the law,

which currently requires a community to support a school if the community votes not to close it.

The cost-sharing group also recommended that there be no ongoing local school boards after the creation of the RSU, because they would have no power and become another layer of bureaucracy.

Van Buren Superintendent Clayton Belanger handed out a

sheet showing the financial impact on each community of consolidation if operating costs and other expenses remain the same as they are now. Only Madawaska would be saving money under those conditions, and three of the other five communities would have expenses go up by more than \$200,000.

The RPC decided to continue with an earlier decision that local

debt should remain with the communities after the RSU is created. Each municipality should e-mail Committee Facilitator Diane Tilton if they have any legal questions about property that they would like help answering.

The committee will schedule public meetings for the week of March 17 in each of the school unit areas so the public will be able to ask questions about the plan before it goes to the state on March 28.

Many members expressed that they feel rushed and cannot support the plan that they are bringing to the community, but Tilton reminded the group that in order to put the plan on the referendum ballot in June, the timeline needed to be followed. Others again expressed frustration with the law itself before the conclusion of the

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