

Town of Trenton

Update on School District Consolidation

September 2008

Public Meeting:

September 24, 2008 6:30 PM Trenton Elementary School

Town Referendum:

November 4, 2008 Trenton Town Office

Effective Date:

July 1, 2009

Question and answer sessions:

September 24, 2008 7:30 AM – 8:30 AM
3:00 PM – 4:00 PM

September 25, 2008 7:30 AM – 8:30 AM
3:00 PM – 4:00 PM

all at Trenton Elementary School

Additional meetings to be announced**Summary:**

In June 2007 the 123rd Maine Legislature passed a law requiring all towns to vote on a plan that would consolidate their school administration with other school units. At that time, the Department of Education's recommendation was for Trenton to join with the towns of Mount Desert Island. After careful study and deliberation of all the options, this was determined to be the best choice for the Trenton community. On Election Day, November 4, 2008, Trenton voters will be asked to approve a reorganization plan to join the Mount Desert Island Regional School System. The benefits to Trenton of becoming a partner in this new school system are:

- Trenton will be joining a well-established educational system that has proven to be successful; the Commissioner of Education has declared the MDI schools to be the gold standard.
- Trenton will retain its own school board, keeping local control over its school and property, hiring of employees, budget, and programs.
- Trenton representatives will serve on the regional board that oversees administration for business functions, special education, and transportation.
- Trenton students will continue to be able to choose which high school to attend.

Educational Benefits to Trenton in Joining the Mount Desert Island Regional School System:

Maine students must demonstrate achievement of the educational standards outlined in Maine's *Learning Results*, and the Town of Trenton is responsible for providing this education for its resident students from kindergarten through grade twelve. Students up through the eighth grade attend Trenton Elementary School and then may choose a high school, for which the town pays tuition on their behalf. Historically, the vast majority of Trenton's high school students have chosen to attend Mount Desert Island High School.

By joining the MDI school system, our K-8 school will be able to offer to Trenton students the same preparation for high school as received by MDI students. The educational benefits of having a coordinated, consistent curriculum enhance the educational opportunities for all students who attend MDI High School. All Trenton students, including those who choose to attend a different high school, may be assured that the educational standards and methodology of the MDI school system reflect one of the best school systems in the state of Maine.

In addition to curriculum, the MDI school system offers outstanding opportunities for continuing professional development and collaboration for teachers, of which students are the direct beneficiaries. In the 21st century educational goals and needs are a constantly changing environment, and the MDI school community has maintained its position on the vanguard, ready to be proactive in order to be continually improving.

Trenton will be joining an established system that works well precisely because each individual school's curriculum and opportunities are enhanced by the fact that they all work together with a commonality of purpose and direction, to educate all students as consistently as possible. The Commissioner of Education, in working directly with MDI school board members on legislation affecting school district consolidation, declared the MDI school system to be the gold standard.

Educational Enhancements to Trenton in Joining the Mount Desert Island Regional School System:

While Trenton is still in the development stage as far as achieving a comprehensive, coordinated curriculum, the MDI school system has one that is well established and proven to be successful. The components are reviewed and updated on a regular basis, and comply with the latest state standards.

Trenton does not currently offer all the programs available in the MDI K-8 schools, such as foreign language and art. By joining their system we will have access to the curriculum for these additional programs as we add them.

Other programs that are currently offered at Trenton, such as strings/music and horticulture, will benefit from opportunities to collaborate with the MDI schools that offer these as well.

Demographics - Student Enrollment:

Ten years ago Trenton Elementary School's enrollment was 167 students, while enrollment this past year was 127.

Fifteen new students have entered kindergarten this fall, putting total enrollment at 127.

At this point in time we expect the future of our school to remain stable, but in the event the school-age population of Trenton were to decline substantially for the long term, we might want to seek other options for providing education. Partnering with the MDI school system makes sense in light of this unknown factor as their school enrollments have also declined over the past decade and our mutual needs might complement one another. If it came about that Trenton were to tuition K-8 students to another school, we would want to be in a system where the other members schools would best serve our students, as well as having the capacity to accommodate them.

Structure of the Mount Desert Island Regional School System:

Under the amended school district consolidation law, the proposed new school system will operate as an “alternative organizational structure”. The prospective members are Bar Harbor, Mount Desert, Southwest Harbor, Tremont, Cranberry Isles, Frenchboro, Swans Island, Trenton, and MDI High School*. Each town will continue to operate its own K-8 school, employ its own staff, develop its own budget, and maintain its own school board. Collectively they will share in the services of a central office that will employ a superintendent and other personnel to provide administration for special education, transportation, and business functions. The individual schools will abide by a common curriculum and assessment standards, school policies, school calendar, and collective bargaining agreements.

Each town will appoint members of its own school board to a regional board with responsibility to oversee the administration of the central office. Based on total population, Trenton will have three representatives on this regional board, as will Mount Desert, Southwest Harbor, and Tremont. Bar Harbor will have four, and the outer islands will each have one. MDI High School will not have separate representation on the regional board.

Timeline of Implementation:

The law requires each town to vote on its consolidation plan by January 30, 2009. Our plan has received approval from the Commissioner of Education and will be ready for the prospective member towns to vote on at the general election, November 4, 2008. The plan will go into effect at the beginning of the next fiscal year, July 1, 2009.

Central Office Administration:

A big difference in the make-up of central office personnel between Trenton’s current arrangement and the proposed

*MDI High School is a legal entity created in 1963 by private and special law, and has its own separate governing board comprised of members from the towns of Bar Harbor, Mount Desert, Southwest Harbor, and Tremont.

one is that more services will be centralized and under the direct supervision of the superintendent. Currently we are part of a consortium that out-sources for special education administration and information technology services. In our new configuration both of these services will be provided for in-house, at a lower effective cost, and more directly accountable to our superintendent.

To accommodate the addition of Trenton to an already existent operation and adequately serve all members will require the addition of one full-time and two part-time staff members to the current central office. The initial projected cost to Trenton will be approximately \$19,000 less than our current assessment for the same services. This offers far more value to Trenton in that the actual expense component for office facilities are located within the high school property and do not require additional expenditures for property and maintenance as our current arrangement does.

School Choice:

Trenton’s high school students currently may choose which high school to attend, and the right to that choice is preserved by the new law. As a member of the MDI school system, but not a member of the MDI High School agreement formed by private and special law, Trenton residents will continue to choose which high school to attend and the town will pay the tuition up to the applicable approved state maximum rate. Assuming most Trenton students continue to elect to attend MDI High School, it must be recognized that the result of this arrangement is a significant financial benefit to our town:

In 2007-2008 Trenton’s cost for tuition to MDI High School was \$8,843 per student, which is less than the actual average cost per student of \$13,894; high-school member towns were assessed between \$10,600 and \$25,500 per student, according to their cost-sharing formula. While the state high school tuition rate generally increases by around 6% per year, Trenton students who attend MDI High School will continue to benefit from the school’s broad offering of programs at an effectively subsidized cost.

It must also be acknowledged that while the current law preserves school choice for Trenton residents, it is possible that school choice could be eliminated by a future change in the law. If that were to occur, it will be important to be aligned with the high school that is currently the predominant choice of Trenton families.

Other Finances:

Collective Bargaining Agreements

From the outset, unified collective bargaining agreements have been a major contention in school district consolidation. The state insists that there is a cost savings to negotiating one contract for all teachers and other employees within each new school district, but the fact is this will be an additional cost to towns like Trenton where the current pay scale lags behind those of their prospective consolida-

tion partners. None of Trenton's options would have avoided this expense. However, along with the many advantages of electing the "alternative organizational structure" is the ability to phase in these increases. We expect that the first additional expenses will take effect in the school year 2012-2013, after our current teachers' contract period expires, and that the final phase will occur by 2014-2015.

It is impossible to gauge what the actual numbers will be in seven years, but today the differential in salary scales for our current teaching staff is approximately \$110,000. Benefits are much more difficult to assess, but the current best estimate is an additional \$83,000. A major factor determining Trenton's future teacher salary and benefit cost will be total staff size as well as the individuals themselves; teachers' salary scales are based on years of education plus years of teaching experience, and health benefits are also based on individuals' requirements. Departures, retirements, or hiring may change the future salary differential in ways that can not be predicted. In the meantime, the school board and administration will be utilizing every opportunity to streamline the operations of the school and contain cost increases in order to lessen the effect of those costs we can not control.

While future payroll costs will increase, there will be some offset in the overall budget due to the fact that the outstanding debt on the school addition will be paid in its entirety by 2015. Annual debt service for 2008 will be \$182,465, and will decline to \$149,840, \$143,315, and \$132,000 in the final three years which is when the phase-in of salary and benefits will occur.

State Contribution vs. Local Share

The Town of Trenton approved a school budget for 2008-2009 of \$3,176,769. While this was \$108,797 over the previous year's budget, the state share dropped from \$510,409 to \$293,118, with Trenton taxpayers making up the difference of \$217,291. This past year's experience was a strong reminder of how fickle and discriminating the state subsidy allocation system is with regard to rural schools. It is only realistic to assume Trenton's state share could easily decline again in the future. As the property valuation of Trenton continues to increase we will become increasingly ineligible to receive state money.

Cost Savings

After over a year of analyzing the effects of school district consolidation, very few participants in the field would suggest that there is any cost savings to be achieved under the new law. The state will save money because they will distribute less of it for general education. Towns that want to maintain their schools will bear the financial burden. Nothing in school district consolidation law addresses educational quality.

The MDI Regional School System is committed to making education a priority. That does not preclude finding ways to

achieve financial savings, and as we move together in our educational goals these opportunities will be fully investigated.

Penalties:

The law requires every municipality to vote on the consolidation plan put forth at referendum. There is no financial incentive to approve a plan, but the law imposes a financial penalty for voting down a plan. The Department of Education has calculated an estimated penalty of \$63,450 for the first year if Trenton votes against the proposed consolidation plan. Penalties will apply in successive years, and depending on the effect of Trenton's valuation on state subsidy formulas, it could be a substantial portion of this subsidy.

The members of Trenton's Regional Planning Committee and the Trenton School Board have invested well over a thousand hours over the past year in assessing Trenton's needs and options. The plan that will be submitted to the voters is, in their opinion, the very best option for our students and our community. Unlike many of Maine's towns, Trenton has the luxury of being able to choose consolidation partners based on the merits of educational excellence.

What is happening around Trenton:

Prior to consolidation Trenton is a member of Union 92, which is comprised of the towns and schools of Hancock, Lamoine, Surry, Trenton, Otis and Mariaville operating Beech Hill School, and Eastbrook and Waltham operating Cave Hill School. Trenton has chosen to work on consolidating with the MDI towns and schools, and Surry has joined the Blue Hill Peninsula towns including Deer Isle/Stonington. Both of these proposed consolidated units will be forming "alternative organizational structures", utilizing the amended law to preserve local control of their schools.

The remaining six Union 92 towns have joined with Ellsworth, Steuben, Winter Harbor, Gouldsboro, Sullivan, Sorrento, and Franklin. These 13 municipalities will be forming a "regional school unit" which is the structure mandated by the original consolidation law. These towns will be turning over the governance of their schools along with their school property and assets to the regional board on which Ellsworth will have three representatives and the rest of the towns will each be represented by one person.