

Vote

School boards urge 'No' vote on referendum

By Scott Mitchell Johnson
Staff Writer

PRESQUE ISLE - In addition to deciding who will become the next President of the United States, local voters will have the opportunity Nov. 4 to decide the fate of a school reorganization referendum question that would potentially join SAD 1, SAD 32 and the Nashville Plantation School Department into one regional school unit.

The referendum question reads: "Do you favor approving the school administrative reorganization plan prepared by the 3-2-1 Reorganization Planning Committee to reorganize Maine

School Administrative District No. 1, Maine School Administrative District No. 32 and Nashville Plantation School Department into a regional school unit with an effective date of July 1, 2009?"

According to Gehrig Johnson, superintendent of both SAD 1 and SAD 32, the plan was developed over the summer by a 30-member regional planning committee (RPC).

"The law called for us to look at joining into one unit," he said, noting that the three school committees are on record as disagreeing with the law. "They directed us to

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rough draft a plan that complied with the law ... a legal plan for submission.

"We put the draft together, and the RPC ultimately voted to move it forward to the school boards, which, in turn, approved it to move forward to Education Commissioner Susan Gendron for her approval," said Johnson.

Gendron has since OK'd the plan to go to referendum.

Johnson said the basic components of the plan join all of the systems into one school district.

"That school district would be divided into seven sub-districts," he said, "resulting in a seven-member school committee. Right now, there are 30 school board members that represent those communities ... 17 in SAD 1, 10 in SAD 32 and three in Nashville Plantation. Those 30 school board members would be reduced to seven."

According to SAD 1 board chair Lucy Richard, if the plan were to be approved, only one board member would represent what is now all of SAD 32 and Nashville Plantation. Four board members would be from Presque Isle, while the other two members would represent the other communities comprising SAD 1.

"Presque Isle would have 54 percent voting representation because it's all based on population," said Richard.

Under the plan, added Johnson, ownership of all the property from the 11 communities would be jointly owned. SAD 32 and Nashville Plantation possess considerable assets including a new school in Ashland, for which they may be reluctant to share joint

ownership. SAD 32 will have debt on their new school and SAD 1 would share that debt in a joint school unit.

"The school farm, which is a special entity owned by SAD 1, would also be jointly owned by SAD 32 and Nashville Plantation," said Johnson. "All debt would be jointly shared. SAD 1 has debt on the bus garage and the middle school, and that would be jointly shared with SAD 32 and Nashville Plantation.

"Many SAD 32 and Nashville Plantation residents feel they would lose a voice in the management and control of their children's education, because they would only have one person representing them on a seven-member board," he said. "That's a tough pill to swallow."

The reorganization plan was explained to residents in Nashville Plantation last Wednesday and in Ashland Tuesday at public hearings. A third public hearing will be held Tuesday, Oct. 28 at 7 p.m. in the Presque Isle High School cafeteria.

SAD 32 and Nashville Plantation board members have already approved a resolution urging community members to vote "No" on the referendum ballot. A similar resolution was OK'd Oct. 16 by the SAD 1 board.

"Every voter in SAD 32 and Nashville Plantation has received the information by mail," said Johnson, "and the SAD 1 and SAD 32 boards have sanctioned a full-page ad in the local newspaper urging voters to oppose the referendum. We want to get the word out and urge voters to vote 'No' on the school reorganization referendum

question.

"The commissioner has already indicated that if the plan fails for any reason," he said, "and SAD 1 immediately filed an alternative plan - to stand alone - she would approve it and no penalty would be accrued. At the present time, SAD 32 would have to take a penalty, which is about \$71,000 a year. However, the commissioner has said she's going to try to fix the penalty issue by submitting a bill to the legislature in January."

Johnson reiterated that for SAD 32, the reorganization plan is a loss of local control issue, while for SAD 1 it's likely a matter of financial concern.

"When the original law was passed, there was built in expectation that money would be saved, but on the ground here in Aroostook, we don't see it in our analysis," he said. "We see no savings to SAD 1, SAD 32, or Nashville Plantation. SAD 1 is very proud of what it has accomplished, very proud of its statewide reputation and its traditions. We see no reason to reinvent this wheel. We have a smooth running, high performing district and we see no reason to dismantle it and start over.

"SAD 32 is also very proud of its academic traditions, its extra-curricular programs, and of course its brand new school coming in 2010," said Johnson. "They want to continue setting the future course for the education of their children."

Voters are encouraged to contact their municipal offices to find out the polling times and locations in their community.