

Education official clarifies school reorganization points for voters St 10/29/08

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PRESQUE ISLE - While school representatives in SAD 1, SAD 32 and the Nashville Plantation School Department are doing what they can to encourage voters to defeat the school reorganization referendum question that will be on the Nov. 4 ballot that would potentially join the three entities into one regional school unit, officials with the state's Department of Education want to clarify a few points that have been raised in press reports before voters head to the polls.

According to David Connerty-Marín, director of communications for the Maine Department of Education, Commissioner Susan Gendron has not told any school district that should a plan fail, she would approve an alternative plan and no penalty be accrued to the district.

"The commissioner has not indicated that a district would automatically get an alternative plan approved," he said. "In fact, it would be subject to a great deal of scrutiny as all plans are.

"People are certainly entitled to vote 'No,' but I would hate to see them vote 'No' on the assumption that they could just go out and get an alternative plan approved," said Connerty-Marín. "If one community were to vote the referendum down, the regional planning committee (RPC) would have to file something. They could either file an alternative plan - which would be to stand alone - and hope that it gets approved by the commissioner,

or they could go back and try to create a new reorganization plan either with the same partners or with a different set of partners."

The department spokesman said the way the law is written now, there is "no provision that allows the commissioner to waive penalties for any district that doesn't have a plan that's been approved by the voters, or an alternative plan."

"If the voters reject a plan and the district doesn't come up with another plan," Connerty-Marín said, "they would be subject to penalties."

"The commissioner has said publicly that she would support legislation that would give a one-year reprieve on penalties to school districts that have voted 'Yes' on the referendum but where the referendum has failed overall," he said. "For districts that are left at the alter - they said 'Yes' but the other districts said 'No,' the commissioner would support legislation for a one-year reprieve. It would have to be approved by the Legislature; it is not something that she can do on her own. The law does not currently give her that authority."

In a resolution that was approved by board members of SAD 1, SAD 32 and Nashville Plantation, it states that "if the reorganization plan is approved,

there will be a first-year shifting of over \$300,000 in local property taxes from SAD 1 to SAD 32 and Nashville Plantation just to equalize the current levels of local funding."

Connerty-Marín said a law that was amended this April allows districts to create their own formula for cost sharing.

"If there is cost shifting in their plan," he said, "that's a shame because the law allows them to create a formula that would avoid any cost shifting. Districts can also fix that when the RSU board is created; their plan contains a provision for how to change the cost sharing formula in the future."

The referendum question that will face local voters Nov. 4 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?"

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