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School district merger idea not popular

by Ruth Roberts

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A round table meeting called last week by Supervisor Mary Piepho to discuss the possible unification of East County's five small school districts proved a non-starter, ending with the majority of superintendents and education board members in attendance opposing the idea of a merger.

Piepho, who said Brentwood School Superintendent Merrill Grant had reached out to her following discussions with county superintendents over a possible countywide sales tax measure for schools, hosted the April 26 meeting. Piepho said she was a neutral facilitator for the meeting, with no vested interest in the discussion. "If they (superintendents) are going to go out for a revenue measure, then they are going to have to consider financial efficiencies and decide if consolidation is one of them," said Piepho. "I thought the meeting went well."

The consolidation of school districts is often seen as a financial savings, a move that in this case would allow for the area's five districts – Byron, Brentwood, Knightsen, Oakley and the Liberty Union High School District – to potentially benefit from employing just one superintendent and a shared array of district services.

Many of the superintendents and board members, however, said the administrative costs saved by consolidation might not be as great as some would believe, and the potential loss of each district's autonomy and community identity might be too high a price to pay.

"I'm not sure how or even if something like this would benefit us," said Knightsen Superintendent Theresa Estrada. "Of course, I like the smaller environment here at Knightsen and I like the hands-on, small-community feel. I think you have to ask yourself what are you giving up and what is more important."

Byron Union School Superintendent Ken Jacopetti said he too valued his district's small community feel and individuality, but added that he might be open to future discussion, especially regarding shared district services.

The Oakley Union School District came out firmly against the merger, as did Brentwood's school board. "My board is definitely not in favor of the consolidation," said Grant. "And they were pretty vocal in that. I think it's just a little too much for folks to bite off right now."

"My only concern is for the students and staff of the Brentwood School District," said Brentwood School Board Member Heather Partida. "And the more I look at

the idea of consolidation, the more I'm convinced that it's not in the best interests of the students and staff of Brentwood. I'm afraid that bringing a high school into the mix will take the focus away from our elementary students and shift it toward high school exit exams or high school sports or myriad other issues that are currently not issues for our kids."

Piepho, however, insisted that the meeting was not about consolidation, but collaboration. "I think some people were jumping to the consolidation conclusion and resisting it, and the meeting wasn't about that," said Piepho. "It was about working smarter, not harder, and looking for way to collaborate, and that maybe there are some services that can be shared."

For many, the greater issue at the meeting was the perceived appropriateness of Piepho hosting a discussion on schools, a topic over which she has no official jurisdiction. While the meeting was posted on the Brentwood school district website as a public meeting, and three of Brentwood's five school board members were in attendance – which under the rules of the Brown Act makes it a public meeting – Piepho asked a reporter to leave the meeting so that it would be possible to have "an honest and open dialogue." In order to eliminate a quorum, Brentwood Board Member Emil Geddes volunteered to also leave, following a brief discussion with Grant and Piepho.

Jacopetti admitted he was surprised by Piepho's request that the reporter leave, adding that he saw no problem with having a representative of the media present.

"I think it would have been fine to have the media there," said Jacopetti. "I think it might have been an even better and more open meeting if someone was there reporting it."

Partida agreed. "I was disappointed," she said. "Every person around that table represented a public agency, and the majority of them were elected or were representing folks who were elected. I would have hoped the meeting was open to the public that we work for."

Theresa Sidrian, business manager for the Knightsen school district, said she found the forum unusual. "Was this the correct venue?" said Sidrian. "I thought it was a strange way to go about it. The superintendents and the school boards should be the ones talking about this."

To date, there are no plans to continue the consolidation conversation, although some school officials are of the opinion that future meetings on the topic should be handled within the education community.

"I guess I'm still mystified why a county supervisor would interject herself into a public school matter," said Oakley Union School District Superintendent Rick

Rogers. “In my opinion it would be equally inappropriate if the Oakley school board had a meeting to discuss how they could consolidate their (county) departments to be more efficient within the county. We have proper forums for this kind of discussion and we do that. This was not it.”

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