

Board to decide

Decision pending on school closing

By BARBARA UNDERWOOD

The jury is out on Vaughan Elementary School. It will return with a verdict on Dec. 19.

The Bloomfield Hills Board of Education will decide on that date whether to close Vaughan School. And on Jan. 8, the board will consider and possibly decide whether a second school should be closed, which school it may be and a plan for reassigning students if a second school is closed.

Temper flared briefly at the close of a crowded, four-hour board meeting Monday, most of which was devoted to reports and discussion of enrollment trends, results of a district-wide pre-school census and possible school closings.

Pat Carney, a "frustrated and very angry citizen," exchanged some heated comments with Supt. Fred Thorin at the end of the meeting when Carney charged that he had been unable to obtain the census results prior to Monday's meeting.

Carney and other Vaughan parents believe the board has not analyzed the census data sufficiently to use the information in a decision that could close a school.

THORIN HAD reported that the census information was not complete, "but the results are such that the board can make a meaningful decision." Returns are still coming in from 1,500 forms mailed to homes where no personal contact was possible.

"Those coming in are very low in the numbers of pre-school children," Thorin said. "But we have concrete evidence that the numbers of pre-school children are very low throughout the district and we have reason to believe kindergarten enrollments will be just about where we suggested they would be when we reported to the board in August."

Based on previous projections, the kindergarten enrollment this fall was estimated at 369. Actual enrollment was 359. Kindergarten enrollment for 1979, based on the available census data, is 347 students. The number drops to 255 in 1983.

Vaughan parents believe the board is premature in making a decision about closing the school on Dec. 19, when census data is incomplete. Results of additional questions asked by the census takers have not been compiled and should be reviewed by the board before making a decision, they contend.

"The board committed itself to do a full analysis of the census data and now it is backing off," Vaughan parent Don Carlson said.

THE ADMINISTRATION promised Monday that a representative sample of results of the additional census questions would be made available for board study before the Dec. 19 decision is made.

Thorin stressed that "the education at Vaughan is splendid, excellent. That is not the issue," he added. "Cost is."

However, no dollar amount has been included in budget projections for the 1979-80 year in revenue from the possible sale or lease of Vaughan or any other school in the district.

"We purposely have not done that," Thorin said. "We have no idea what a 51-year-old building is worth on the open market."

Thorin was asked last month to prepare rough drafts of three budgets for the board for Monday's meeting—one assuming all schools would be open, one assuming Vaughan would be closed and a third assuming two schools would be closed.

THE ESTIMATED budget for keeping all schools open totals \$23,913,000, an increase of 14.6 percent over the current year's \$20,865,000 budget. Closing one school would result in an estimated \$198,000 savings. Closing two schools but keeping one for community use would save approximately \$170,000, Thorin said.

Trustee Larry Flora made the motion to take a vote on closing Vaughan at the Dec. 19 meeting. He suggested that the board "attempt to retain the title to the property and have continued use of the athletic fields."

The other six trustees supported the motion, although Charles Bowers hesitated long enough that several persons in the room believed he had voted against it.

"We have been dealing with this (the Vaughan closing) at every meeting since August," Flora said. "I still have a lot of homework to do, but the fact remains that a decision has to be made and that decision is the responsibility of this board."

"We can have all the surveys and interpretations we want, but the board will have to take the responsibility for making the decision."

ANNA MAY SMITH, one of the few persons who spoke who was not a Vaughan parent, said she believed "the first question should be 'should we close a school?' and then decide which school." She and others urged the board to vote then on the question of whether to close any school.

Flora said he made his motion naming Vaughan School "because all the discussion has been on Vaughan."

"I want to get Vaughan out of the way, one way or another," Flora added. "If we vote not to close Vaughan, it doesn't mean we are not going to close any school."

Taffy Walker, a Vaughan parent, said she understood its marketability was one of the chief reasons it was listed as a prime candidate for closing in a report of the superintendent's advisory committee last spring. Cranbrook was cited as having a possible interest in the adjacent Vaughan site.

"WITHOUT THAT how can you still consider Vaughan for closing?" Mrs. Walker asked.

"Marketability was one of the criteria, an important factor, but not the prime factor," Thorin replied. "The proximity of children to school is a key criteria to be considered. We build schools where children are."

More than half of the children attending Vaughan live closer to another elementary school in the district.

Thorin said he had been contacted by several people interested in Vaughan, but that he had "refused to talk to anyone until a decision is made."

He also has received a letter stating that Cranbrook is no longer interested in the school, Thorin said.

ANOTHER VAUGHAN parent, Olga Chao, commented that the board had not considered "a motion about closing no schools." The board did not discuss an alternative discussed earlier to hold a special election to let voters decide whether to keep all schools open.

Trustee Joan Ziegler was asked to

explain a comment she had made at a meeting at Vaughan School last week regarding an alternative use for the school. She reportedly said at the time that she would not discuss it until the remaining six board members were present.

One possible use for Vaughan would be to move the administrative offices into the school, Mrs. Ziegler said.

"It would address a longstanding problem in the district of a critical need for more central office space," she said. "It is a viable alternative that needs to be looked at."

The suggestion was not discussed further by the board or those in the audience.

TRUSTEE JAMES Graham, also a Vaughan parent, said nothing throughout the meeting except to vote on the two dates for decision making regarding the school closings.

But at the end of the discussion he said, "This is not a task we embrace with any pleasure. We did not invite it upon ourselves, but we must confront it."

"We will be damned if we do and damned if we don't. We have the perspective of several years, but it doesn't make us infallible."

"The only answer that will make everyone happy is to keep Vaughan open," he added. "We have to vote our conscience. Whether we are right or wrong, we want is best for our children," he said.

"There was resistance when we closed Wing Lake School, but history has proved it was the right thing to do."

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