

## **Study outlines impact of consolidating school districts**

### **FROM THE FRONT**

#### **Richfield Joint 1, Friess Lake examine options**

#### **Consolidation: Next meeting for districts is in February**

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**RICHFIELD** — Facts in black and white.

That's what officials of the Friess Lake and Richfield Joint 1 school districts were hoping to receive with the recent completion of a report studying the impact of a possible consolidation of the districts.

On Monday, night school boards from both districts and about 20 area residents gathered at the Richfield Village Hall to hear the results of the study outlining the fiscal impact of combining the two adjacent school districts.

School Business Specialist Debby Schufletowski of Robert W. Baird & Co. discussed the report that explained how combining or not combining the two districts would impact each over the next five years or more.

Schufletowski said there are many reasons districts consider consolidation.

"They include program retention or enhancement, maintaining class size, financial incentives and operational efficiencies," Schufletowski said. "Geographic reasons could also be involved."

Schufletowski said the study indicated both districts are expected to continue the trend of declining enrollment over the next several years. According to the report, Richfield has 408 students for the current school year, while Friess Lake has 132. Richfield is expected to see a drop to 398 in 2018-19 and Friess Lake could see a drop to about 128 that same year.

"If the districts combine they are expected to have a total student FTE of 520 in 2018-19 with a drop to 463 by 2021-22," Schufletowski said. "With fewer students there is a decline in state aid."

She also explained that the new mill rate for the combined district, if consolidation took place, would be based on the sum of the two districts' rates.

"In 2018-19, if the districts consolidated the combined mill rate would be about \$5.59 per thousand," she said. "If the districts remained separate the expected mill rates would be \$3.86 per thousand for Friess Lake and \$5.74 per thousand for Richfield. So there would be an increase for Friess Lake and a decline for Richfield."

Schufletowski said the study indicated by 2021-22 the combined mill rate could fall to about \$4.58 per thousand.

"The state also would provide increased aid for districts that consolidate," she said. "It's estimated the combined district could receive about \$396,000 in 2018-19, about \$295,000 in 2019-20 with it falling to about \$160,000 in 2022-23. That's extra aid — aid in addition to the per pupil aid you normally receive."

Friess Lake Superintendent John Engstrom said the districts wanted to know if it would be better for both districts to become one.

"We wanted to think outside the box and see if having the two join would make us stronger and provide a better educational opportunity for students from both districts," Engstrom said.



With members of the Friess Lake School District sitting on the left and members of the Richfield Joint School District No. 1 on the right, Friess Lake School Principal John Engstrom, left, and Richfield School District Administrator Tara Villalobos speak with audience members during a consolidation study meeting between the districts Monday night at Richfield Village Hall. **John Ehlke/Daily News**

Richfield Joint 1 Superintendent Tara Villalobos said the districts wanted the public to hear the information from the study so “deep, meaningful, honest and open discussions can be held.”

“Some district officials have heard some of the report already, but this is the first time the rest of the board members and the public will have heard much of this,” Villalobos said.

The superintendents said that after Monday night’s meeting the two boards will discuss the information they received and the possible consolidation when they meet in February.

“If they are still interested in the idea or if they are not, we will draft a letter to let you (the public) know what’s ahead,” Villalobos said.

Schufletowski said if both boards decide to move ahead on consolidation, the first step would be drafting a resolution that would need to be approved by both districts by July.

“The boards could decide to move ahead without a referendum or the public could petition for a referendum to be held,” Schufletowski said. “If a referendum is passed or if none is held and the boards agree on consolidation it could take effect already on July 1, 2018.”

Schufletowski said if a referendum is sought by the public, a petition must be filed that includes “signatures of at least 10 percent of the electors who reside in any affected school district” and it must be filed with the clerk of the school district with the highest equalized valuation of the affected school districts. In this case that would be the Richfield Joint 1 District clerk.



Bill McGrath of Hubertus listens to Richfield School District Administrator Tara Villalobos during a consolidation study meeting between the Richfield Joint School District No. 1 and the Friess Lake School

District on Monday night at the Richfield Village Hall. **John Ehlke/Daily News**

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