

MINUTES
SPECIAL CALLED TRUSTEES MEETING
BAMBERG SCHOOL DISTRICTS ONE & TWO
Denmark-Olar Board Room
Bamberg County, South Carolina
August 3, 2020 – 6:00 p.m.

Bamberg District Two Board and Attendees:

Beverly Bonaparte, Chair
Blossom Thompson, Vice Chairman
Loretta P. Goodman, Secretary
Tonie Holman, Board Member
Larry Bias, Board Member
Thelma Sojourner, Superintendent
Michelle Nimmons, Human Resource Director
Oggretta Tyler, Finance Director
Charles Boykin, Attorney, Boykin & Davis, LLC
Lynn Smith, Attorney, Boykin & Davis, LLC

Bamberg District One Board and Attendees:

Gwendolyn D. Bamberg, Board Member
John Hiers, Board Member
Tony Duncan, Board Member
Dottie Brown, Interim Superintendent
Devon B. Furr, Finance Director
Ricky Padgett, Technology Director
Gene Wittmer, Consolidation Consultant

Representative Justin Bamberg and Senator Brad Hutto participated in the meeting virtually.

CALL TO ORDER

Mrs. Bonaparte called the special meeting to order. In accordance with the SC Code of Laws, 1976, section 30-480(e) as amended, the following had been notified of the time, date, place and agenda of the meeting: WIIZ Radio Station, Barnwell; *The Advertiser-Herald*, Bamberg; and *The Times and Democrat*, Orangeburg.

ROLL CALL

Roll Call was conducted with attendance as recorded above.

MOMENT OF SILENCE

A moment of silence was observed.

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

The meeting agenda was unanimously approved as written without objection.

Mrs. Bonaparte stated that the purpose of the meeting was to provide the community to speak to and hear from our legislators, Senator Brad Hutto and Representative Justin Bamberg, regarding the consolidation process of the two school districts.

Mr. Wittmer facilitated the question/answer portion of the meeting beginning with four questions received by email. (Attachment 1)

Mrs. Bonaparte thanked Sen. Hutto and Rep. Bamberg for their participation. She requested that Ms. Furr provide her with a copy of the consolidation plan that has been submitted so it may be shares with Bamberg Two board members at their next meeting on August 10.

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ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned without objection at 8:30 p.m.

Submitted by,

Yang Bin Lieth P Goodma

Some Holman

Approved:

Blair Thompson
Beverly Popper

Prepared by:

Deborah M. Anderson

- 1. The original requests from the state were for consolidation of school services. From there we have entered into discussions of consolidating school districts which is not the same. In order to consolidate school districts, it requires a bill sponsored by our local state delegation which would be Bamberg and Hutto. Sponsorship and proposal of this bill does not require citizen input or consensus. Because of these ongoing discussions, should the citizens of Bamberg assume that Rep. Bamberg and/or Senator Brad Hutto, will sponsor a bill for consolidating our school districts? Will you consider the input or concerns of citizens and school board members?**

Rep. Bamberg responded that no legislation has been filed to date; however, consolidation does need state legislation filed by (1) Sen. Hutto, (2) Rep. Bamberg, or (3) any member of the House or Senate. He stated that, as far as a bill moving forward, they are not going to force anyone to consolidate but there has been substantial pressure from the SC Department of Education to consolidate small districts, and legislators have attempted to address some of the issues experienced in education and the state has begun to incentivize consolidation in smaller districts. He stated that the boards don't have to consolidate, but both boards had voted to consolidate in the interest of the children in both districts, and that is the direction in which they were moving. If the districts don't consolidate, he believes it will only be a matter of time before the districts are forced to consolidate. There is still \$7 million currently available as an incentive for the districts to move forward with consolidation, upon passage of consolidation legislation, and upon the appointment of a new board for the consolidated district. If the districts don't proceed with the consolidate process, they will eventually be forced to consolidate without the \$7 million incentive and input into the process.

Sen. Hutto stated that there is a nearly unanimously consensus in Columbia that every county should have one school district and they are and have been trying to get people to discuss openly any concerns they have with consolidation. The incentive money is available to assist with the process. He urged that the Orangeburg District consolidation legislation not be used as a template and recommended that the Hampton or Clarendon models be considered for Bamberg County.

- 2. The selling points for consolidating school services, not school districts, were the cost savings and more dollars per student. Considering the remaining debt for Bamberg's building project and the new debt of building a new school in Denmark which was supported by Rep. Bamberg, will consolidation still offer a cost savings for the state and citizens?**

Rep. Bamberg said that there are no selling points but real life options and possibilities for the future of the county. Consolidating school services should have been done prior to now, with the declining population and student enrollment across the county, to help alleviate the tax burden. Consolidation, long-term, will save the county money.

Sen. Hutto agreed that, currently, there are dual positions in the two school districts and by eliminating the duplications, the county will realize long-term savings.

- 3. If you intend to propose this bill regardless of citizens' voice, how do you explain to citizens of Bamberg why this consolidation is beneficial to them? How is this fair and equitable when they will now take on new debt that was only voted on by Denmark citizens for new school buildings? I know that this decision will ultimately fall on the consolidated school board if consolidation occurs. However, consolidation will force the school board combining the debt.**

Sen. Hutto responded that he has had a lot of people in Bamberg asking him for consolidation.

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Attachment 1 continued

Rep. Bamberg responded that there have been multiple meetings held in the county regarding consolidation. He encouraged citizens to contact their school board members regarding any issues they may have. He further stated that a lot of the questions regarding consolidation do not address the benefits for the children, but are more about money and other matters. He stated that consolidation will benefit the students and teachers of the county. If consolidation is done now, the financial incentive will assist in the transition. He stated that Bamberg One did a bond in 2013 for \$28 million to build a needed K-6 school facility for their students and teachers. A couple of years ago, Bamberg Two did a bond for \$38 million to build a needed Pre-K-8 school and renovate the existing high school for their students and teachers. At the time the bond was done in Bamberg One, everyone knew that the enrollment and population was declining so citizens should not be upset that Bamberg Two built a facility for the benefit of the children. Consolidation will force the districts to combine the debt.

- 4. It has been mentioned that school consolidation can help with improving the test scores in Denmark. However, other school districts are seeing gains in test scores with more support from State Department specialists and services without consolidation. Specifically, share how this consolidation benefits the local citizens?**

Rep. Bamberg stated that he could not speak on whether other school districts experienced improved test scores without consolidation because the majority of counties have one school district but that he agrees that the resources available through the Department of Education will be a great resource for the students. Increased attention and services to education throughout the state will continue to be of benefit to the students.

Mr. Hiers asked what is the status of Bill S203 which was the bill in legislature that enticed consolidation with funding and strong-armed the districts, that if the districts did not present a consolidation plan by August 1 the districts would be forced to merge.

Sen. Hutto responded that the bill was held up by COVID-19 when legislative operations shut down. Nothing advanced on the House or Senate calendars after the shutdown and the bill will have to be reintroduced.

Mr. Hiers stated that constituents approved the bond debt in Districts One and Two by referendum. He stated that Bamberg One constituents have been asking him, if consolidation occurs, if Bamberg One can legally pick up the debt of Bamberg Two without being voted on in a referendum.

Sen. Hutto responded that the debts, budgets and assets of the two districts will be combined upon consolidation. Both districts have taken on debt and that they are fighting to be sure the state pays its fair share and, with declining enrollment, they must convince legislatures to provide funds for small, rural districts and they will continue to ask for funding. South Carolina attracts business and they are trying to have some of the funding disseminated to rural districts to more fully fund education.

Rep. Bamberg stated that there are citizens that erroneously think that Bamberg One has almost paid off its debt while they actually still owe approximately \$24 million the last time he saw the figures. He encouraged people to think about the fact that the population and student enrollment have declined, and there are more residential homes for sale in the county. If consolidation does not happen, population and student enrollment continues to decline, and the loss of businesses continues, taxes could go up.

Dr. Sojourner stated that in talking about the debt of the two districts, as the 7-12 grade schools in Bamberg One continue to age, there will be additional funds needed for repairs to their older buildings.

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Attachment 1 continued

Sen. Hutto stated that there will always be building-related costs.

Mr. Willmer stated that someone asked for a comparison of the debts for Bamberg One and Two. He stated that that question would be a finance department question. He stated that a consideration could be investigating if the total debts could be consolidated to lower the interest rate and time remaining on the debt. That could be addressed to finance persons.

Sen. Hutto stated that consolidation is going to happen at some point and that, at this time, the districts have an opportunity to somewhat determine how consolidation will happen, with incentive funding from the state.

Dr. Sojourner asked if the \$7 million discussed is in addition to the \$3 million previously discussed.

Sen. Hutto stated that even though consolidation may not happen immediately, the \$7 million is still available but cannot be released until Sen. Hutto and Rep. Bamberg introduce and pass the framework for consolidation at a future date.

Mr. Hiers asked what the new plan submission deadline is since the first deadline of August 1 has passed.

Sen. Hutto stated that he was unaware of a deadline but that there must be some indication that the consolidation effort is moving forward. If the districts determine they do not want to move forward with consolidation, then they should let that be known so that the funds may be released to other school districts.

Mrs. Goodman asked how board members will be selected for the consolidated board.

Rep. Bamberg and Sen. Hutto agreed that once the consolidation legislation is passed, a new temporary board for the consolidated district will probably be appointed with staggered elections. There is no requirement that current school board members will be a part of the new board.

Mrs. Bonaparte clarified that both districts had voted to move forward with consolidation, submitted a consolidation plan to the State Superintendent, and that the next step would be for Sen. Hutto and Rep. Bamberg to submit a bill for approval by the legislature.

Rep. Bamberg stated that once the bill passes, the school districts will be consolidated.

Mrs. Brown stated that Mrs. Janeth Walker, Bamberg One board chair, who was unable to attend the meeting, sent to her a comment that a draft plan had been submitted to Department of Education to indicate the progress made and that they are still in final stages of providing a working plan to the Department of Education.

Sen. Hutto stated that the earliest a bill could be introduced is mid-September. If not approved at that time, legislators will not meet again until January. He and Rep. Bamberg are looking for a plan that is in favor of the children of the county, which they feel will pass.

**Bamberg School District One & Bamberg School District Two
Board of Trustees Meeting
Bamberg School District Two Administrative Office
62 Holly Avenue
Denmark, SC 29042**

**August 3, 2020
6:00 p.m.**

Agenda

1. Call to Order
2. Roll Call
3. Approval of Agenda
4. Questions / Concerns Regarding Proposed Consolidation:
 - Representative Justin Bamberg
 - Senator Brad Hutto
5. Adjourn