



Oceanport School District

BOARD OF EDUCATION • 29 Wolf Hill Avenue • Oceanport, NJ 07757

June 16, 2023

Dear Mayor Kelly and Borough Council:

As you know, the Oceanport Board of Education has been monitoring the efforts of the municipalities of Atlantic Highlands and Highlands to regionalize their three school districts, and in particular the attempt to include the students of Sea Bright in said regionalization efforts.

As the Oceanport Board of Education is the only board of education fully responsible for educating both Oceanport and Sea Bright students for PK-8, the future of our students from Sea Bright is of paramount importance to our District.

At various meetings of the municipalities of Atlantic Highlands, Highlands, and Sea Bright, over the past year, members of the community have raised genuine concerns regarding the educational impact on students from Sea Bright if they are subjected to such a regionalization. In response they have been told that the educational expert who authored the March 2020 Feasibility Study will attend a meeting at some unspecified point in the future to answer questions and until then they can read the feasibility study for information.

Despite serious educational impact, the primary focus of the meetings of the municipalities of Atlantic Highlands, Highlands, and Sea Bright has been the financial impact. For example, during the May 18, 2023, Joint Meeting of the councils for the municipalities of Sea Bright, Highlands, and Atlantic Highlands, the municipalities had a brief presentation from Mr. Bob Benecke, the financial advisor retained by the municipality of Atlantic Highlands on the regionalization matter.

During this Joint Meeting, Mr. Benecke stated that his research shows that Sea Bright would see an estimated savings of approximately \$1.6 million annually over five years. However, we are skeptical of the purported saving publicized by Mr. Benecke and wish to raise these issues with you so that they can be addressed and considered. The purported savings fail to account entirely for the following:

- Transportation. The estimated savings do not consider the cost of transporting students from Sea Bright to the Atlantic Highlands/Highlands.
- Salaries. Mr. Benecke admitted that the salary reconciliation that will need to take place among the Henry Hudson Regional School District, the Atlantic Highlands School



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District, and the Highlands School District will reduce any potential savings. Reconciling the collective bargaining agreements of three separate school districts is no small task, and the result will certainly decrease the estimated savings.

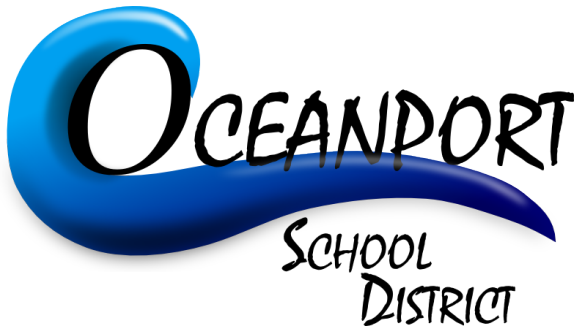
- Special Education. The estimated savings also fail to consider the cost of special education and out-of-district placements. We estimate the cost of out-of-district tuition and corresponding transportation for Sea Bright students to be \$200,000 for PK-8 alone. This cost is borne by the District of Oceanport and has been since July 1, 2009, when pursuant to N.J.S.A. 18A:8-4, the New Jersey Commissioner of Education eliminated the non-operating school district of Sea Bright and merged it with the Oceanport School District, creating a new local school district known as the Oceanport School District for grades PK-8. At such time, Sea Bright ceased being a non-operating school district. Nowhere in the feasibility studies has this even been considered.
- Debt Service. The estimated savings fail to even remotely consider the ongoing continuing debt service and obligation to the Oceanport Public School District regarding **the \$33 million bond referendum, which the voters of Sea Bright approved in December 2019.**

The purported tax savings are short-sighted as they fail to consider even these most basic costs.

Since the boards of education prioritize the education impact, then it is no surprise that under New Jersey law **only** a board of education, not a municipality, can enlarge a regional school district and submit same to the voters through a referendum. As a result, the only entity at this time that can legally put the regionalization of Sea Bright on the ballot is the Oceanport Board of Education, not the Borough of Sea Bright. Any “spin” taken otherwise on the existing law is inaccurate and misleads your constituents.

Notably, the attempts by the council for the municipality of Sea Bright to put the question on the ballot is a blatant disregard for the law. New Jersey law is clear that a question on the enlargement of a regional school district **cannot** be submitted to the voters at a November general election. The law provides a clear list of when the regionalization question may be put forth, and November is clearly absent.

Lastly, it is our understanding that the Borough of Sea Bright has agreed to indemnify and hold harmless the five (5) other government entities, by paying legal fees to defend against Sea Bright’s attempt to unlawfully regionalize. Such payments for attorneys’ fees to Highlands,



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Atlantic Highlands, Henry Hudson Regional School District, Atlantic Highlands School District, and Highlands School District should be questioned and scrutinized.

The Oceanport Board of Education will continue to monitor the regionalization efforts and will continue to stand up for the students of the municipalities of both Oceanport and Sea Bright.

We felt it important that the Mayor and Borough Council of Sea Bright hear directly from the Oceanport Board of Education on this very important issue. It is our expectation that this letter will be read at the June 20, 2023, Borough of Sea Bright council meeting in full transparency.

Thank you.

Oceanport School District Board of Education

Mr. Mark Patterson, Board of Education President
Mrs. Deirdre Bova, Board of Education Vice President
Mrs. Jamie Gough, Board of Education Member
Ms. Patricia Kelly, Board of Education Member
Mrs. Samantha Mahoney, Board of Education Member
Mr. Patrick McSorley, Board of Education Member
Mr. Daniel Peltz, Board of Education Member
Mr. Neal Usatin, Board of Education Member
Mrs. Marion Wilhalme, Board of Education Member