



The

Challenge

June 2001



Fayette, Putnam bonds go down

Voters in Fayette and Putnam counties said a resounding 'no' to school bond issues in May.

On May 5, Fayette County defeated a \$39 million bond that would have reduced the county's seven high schools to three.

Only 798 people voted for the proposal, and 5,008 people voted against it. County Clerk Kelvin Holliday said not one precinct voted for the bond. In Meadow Bridge, where residents opposed busing students long distances, the proposition was defeated 334 to 7.

Putnam County voters overwhelmingly defeated a \$35.8 million bond on May 15. Only 2,527 voted in favor of the proposition,

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— *Tim McCoy*

while 7,518 voted against it.

Challenge West Virginia fellow Tim McCoy, a Putnam County father of two, told *The Charleston Gazette* the defeat is just the latest in a series of bond proposals rejected across West Virginia.

"This is happening all over the state because voters don't want to lose their community schools. Look at

failed bond proposals in Mercer County, Fayette County, Putnam County," McCoy said. "At some point, the state needs to take notice. People will fight for their community schools."

The Putnam bond would have financed a consolidated high school for Buffalo and Poca, an elementary school in growing Teays Valley and additions and renovations at Hurricane and Winfield high schools, Winfield Middle School and Scott Teays and George Washington elementary schools.

An article in *The Charleston Gazette* suggested that voters also were resentful over pay raises given top administrators in Putnam County. Two years ago the school board gave most administrators raises ranging from \$2,000 to \$5,700. In January the school board increased Superintendent Sam Sentelle's salary from \$83,300 to \$89,000 next year and to \$94,500 the year after that.

The average salary for Sentelle and his three assistants, \$78,646, is the second highest in the state, according to State Department of Education statistics reported in *The Gazette*. Only Lincoln County has a higher average, \$81,000.

Hurricane parent Will Carter, who participated in the Vision 20/20 community group that developed the school building plan in Putnam County, said voters were expressing unhappiness with the county school

Wood County PTA to challenge closing of elementary school

A Wood County elementary school PTA may go to court to fight the proposed closing of its school, according to a report in *The Parkersburg Sentinel*. The newspaper said it would be the first time a PTA has taken court action to save a school.

A group of parents from Lincoln Elementary School formed an organization and hired an attorney to keep the school from being closed at the end of this school year. The Lincoln PTA approved giving the group any money left in the PTA's account at the end of the school year to pursue the court case.

The Wood County Board of Education voted earlier this year to close Lincoln, which has been part of the North Parkersburg neighborhood for 75 years.

The school's students would be sent to various other schools, setting off a ripple effect which would force the shifting of students in other schools.

Kelli Myers, spokesperson for the Lincoln group, said she's concerned about classroom size and whether or not special programs will be sacrificed with the closing of Lincoln.

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This 'n that from around the state

- According to *The Lincoln Journal*, county school officials have put together a report outlining potential transportation times if the four high schools are consolidated. Students from the Big Ugly area face bus rides of an hour and 40 minutes one way; Alkol an hour and 25 minutes; Francis Creek an hour and 23 minutes; Coal River, an hour and 15 minutes; McCorkle an hour and 10 minutes. All exceed current state guidelines of one hour one way for high school students.

But, as the county's transportation director said, "It's a recommendation, it's not a requirement. Counties all over the state violate that recommendation every day."

- State Police Superintendent Howard Hill told the Associated Press he's willing to transfer troopers to detachments closer to their homes to save commuting time and money. Hill said agency analysts believe a penny increase in the cost of gasoline equals about \$10,000 in the agency's budget. Wonder if anyone's done any analysis of the effect of rising fuel costs on school systems?

- A Berkeley County school bus driver has been cited for an April 30 accident that injured a student and a passenger in another vehicle. The bus driver was charged with failure to reduce speed to avoid a collision after coming around a curve and rear-ending a pickup truck.

- The State Board of Education is allowing Ted Mattern to break his four-year contract with the Mingo County school system in order to take the position of superintendent in Upshur County. Mattern was named superintendent of Mingo County schools when the state took over the system in 1998. In Upshur County, he is replacing Mary Alice Klein, who resigned in March. The state board named David Temple to replace Mattern in Mingo.

- Fayette County Superintendent Larry Coleman said his decision to retire on June 30 is not tied to the failure of the county's bond issue in May.

- Former Jefferson County superintendent Jud Romine has been asked to resume the job while the county Board of Education searches for a permanent replacement for David Markoe, who resigned at the end of March.

- Logan County Superintendent Ray Woolsey



announced his retirement in April. The board named Brenda Skibo to replace Woolsey.

- Wyoming County school board member Don Nuckols has been indicted on a charge of retaliating against an employee who filed a grievance after being passed over for a principal's position. Della Houck, assistant principal at Oceana High School, filed a grievance when she did not get the principal's job at Glen Rogers Grade School. The indictment accuses Nuckols of blocking Houck from getting the assistant principal's job at Wyoming East High School in retaliation for her grievance.

- Seventy percent or more of Putnam County students in every grade level except the 11th scored at or above the 50th percentile on the Stanford-9 achievement test. Eleventh graders averaged 68.3 percent.

- The Kanawha County Board of Education has rejected a proposal that would have given central office administrators hefty pay raises. The board repealed a five-year-old regulation that would have given administrators and principals automatic pay raises every time the Legislature gives salary hikes to teachers. Teacher groups applauded the decision.

- West Virginia has slipped in teacher pay rankings from 36th in 1997-98 to 39th in 1999-2000, according to the American Federation of Teachers. The state ranked 41st in beginning teacher salaries in 1999-2000 with an average starting salary of \$23,829.

- In a recent column, Fred Pace, editor of the *Lincoln Journal*, suggested that state officials are committing some of the same offenses they accused county officials of when the state took control of the school system. According to Pace, a teacher wrote his own job description for a position, something county officials were cited for by state auditors. Pace also complained that the local board was completely left out of the site selection process for the proposed new consolidated high school. "Just because our school system has been taken over that doesn't mean our local board members, our teachers, our other school personnel, our parents and our students don't matter anymore. I think (Superintendent Bill) Grizzell and his state Board of Education bosses are making a big mistake forcing some of these issues down the throats of the people," he wrote.

Bond defeats . . .

system's leadership.

"It's really clear the school board hasn't earned the trust of the people," he said. "They either need to learn or get out of the way."

He said his group needed to get together with people who opposed the bond and try to develop a plan everyone can support.

The Fayette County bond would have funded 15 school projects, including the high school con-

PTA . . .

Safety also is an issue with some of the parents, according to the *Sentinel*. Parents expressed concern that children will have to cross major thoroughfares on their way to school instead of the quieter side streets the children now travel.

solidations.

Ron Patterson, a member of Citizens for Community Schools and father of two children in Meadow Bridge school, said voters were not solely concerned about high taxes, but about the impact on education.

"I do not think board members have any idea what would come about from the consolidation. They just thought, 'New facilities are better.'" Patterson asked why the county wouldn't consider a bond to shore up existing schools.

Putnam County officials had said before the bond that schools would be consolidated regardless of the vote. Now they're saying they have to go back and assess the situation in light of the bond failure and

the county's need for updated facilities.

Fayette officials say they still plan to reduce the number of high school despite the bond defeat.

"We will still go with the same plan to reduce seven high schools to three," said board president Bill Arthur. "We just won't have the new facilities and renovations."

Paul McClung, president of Fayette Citizens for Community Schools, said he sees a stark contradiction in the fact that the board wanted to raise taxes to close schools, but "now they are offering to do



Tim McCoy

it for free."

McClung told *The Charleston Gazette* he hopes board members understand money was not the main issue that defeated the bond.

He said Fayette County voters have a history of supporting school funding issues they believe in.

Officials debate meaning of bond votes

The executive director of the State School Building Authority (SBA) has weighed in on the recent bond defeats.

Clacy Williams told the *Charleston Daily Mail* he thought all but three of eleven bond issues that failed last year were defeated because "people don't want these big, mega, omnibus bond issues to solve all the problems in their counties."

Williams said two of the three bonds that passed – in Wyoming and Barbour counties – were less than \$8

million. The third was a \$27.5 million bond in Kanawha County.

The failed bonds ranged from \$12 million in Marion County to \$80 million in Monongalia County.

A majority of the failed bonds also involved big, mega, consolidated schools, while the Kanawha County bond went to upgrade existing facilities.

"The underlying theme is that people don't want an increase in property taxes," Williams said. "But some counties have their own

local issues, like they fear it will bring about consolidation or they don't trust the school board."

House Education Committee chairman Jerry Mezzatesta said counties would have a better chance of getting their bond issues passed if the process were more open.

"I'm not going to second-guess the wisdom of the voters," Mezzatesta said, "but I do think this ought to be a wake-up call for people to go to their local boards and demand a better line of commun-

ication. The more you get parents involved, the better chance you have."

The Legislature recently approved a \$200 million bond sale for the SBA.

Williams said that money likely will not be available until 2004.

Since the beginning of 2000, bonds have been defeated in Putnam, Fayette, Pleasants, Monongalia, Jefferson, Mercer, and twice in Marion while those in Barbour, Wyoming and Kanawha passed.

The Challenge

The Challenge is published by Challenge West Virginia, a state-wide organization committed to maintaining and improving small community schools and reforming education policy in West Virginia so that all of our state's children have the opportunity to receive a first-class education and the promise of a bright future.

Challenge members believe state education policy, which has resulted in the closing of a fourth of West Virginia's schools during the past ten years, does not serve the best interest of many children, especially those from low-income families who live in rural areas.

Challenge West Virginia is a program of Covenant House, an independent, non-profit organization in Charleston, WV, which is not connected to any other program by the same name.

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