

Merging systems would be an arduous project, hard sell

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STARKVILLE — Merging the Oktibbeha County and Starkville city school systems could be costly and complicated, but could reap benefits in the long run, according to a local official who has been through it before.

An education improvement committee within the Greater

Starkville Development Partnership has recommended the city and county governments consider merging the school systems.

Lester Beason, superintendent of the Columbus Municipal



Beason

School system, went through the process with the Jackson city and Madison County school systems in Tennessee.

“There were a number of reasons that those two school districts decided to consolidate,” Beason said.

The top reason was because the districts were so close together that it didn’t make economic sense to have two of everything.

“We felt it would be much

more efficient to have a single school system,” Beason said.

But “the efficiencies they were hoping for didn’t materialize,” Beason said.

The projected cost for the merger had been \$11 million, but after the process was complete the price tag hovered at \$28 million, in part because the consolidated district had to adopt the higher salary schedules and benefit packages from each district, which cost more

than expected.

Beason said the entire effort took about 18 months.

First, the community had to be educated about why the system would work.

Convincing everyone involved that the benefits would outweigh the cost was a key part of the project, Beason said.

“You have to focus on why you’re going to do this, then look at the cost,” he said.

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Merge

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But he pointed out that every community is different.

"Each place has to look at it and determine for themselves," Beason said.

The idea is nothing new for Starkville and Oktibbeha County.

"It has come up from time to time for many, many years," said Larry Box, former superintendent of the Starkville School District.

One of the biggest roadblocks is the structure of the school boards.

"They're set up entirely differently," Box said.

The city school board members are appointed by the board of aldermen, but in the county one board member is elected in each supervisor's district.

According to state law, in a consolidated district the board would be elected. The city would be divided up based on the supervisors' districts.

This could dilute voter strength in the city, possibly meaning none of the board members would be elected from within city limits.

"That's one of the issues that would always come up," Box said.

The superintendent would be hired by the board.

The other issue that has stood in the way of consolidation is money.



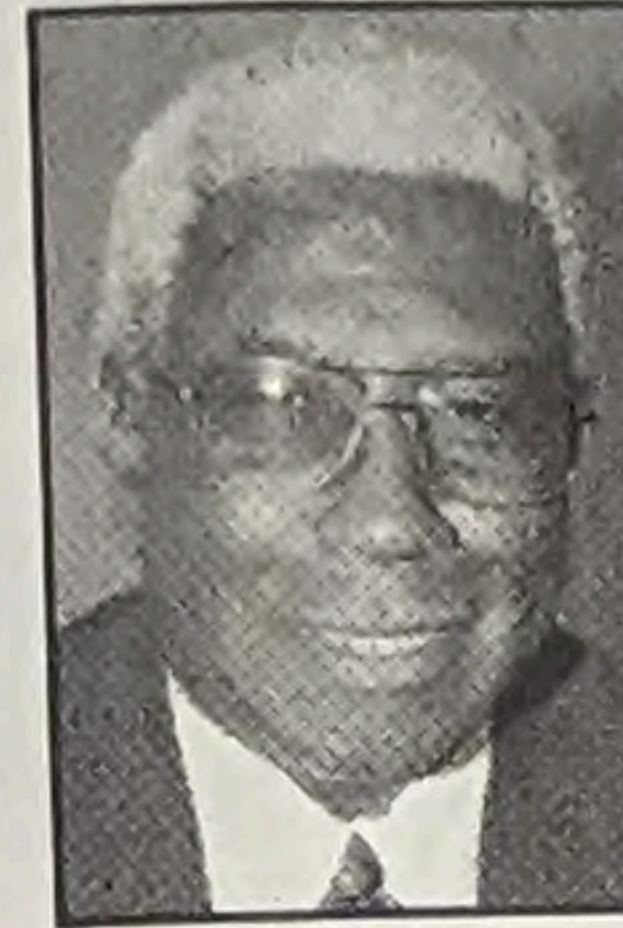
Box

interests of students, so they taxed at the level that they were able to do that," Box explained.

To offer this range of programs to the county schools would require "a very, very substantial increase in taxes," Box said.

The alternative would be to cut programs to spend more money in county schools, he

"For many years, the (Starkville) board and superintendent were very interested in offering a wide, broad curriculum to meet the needs and



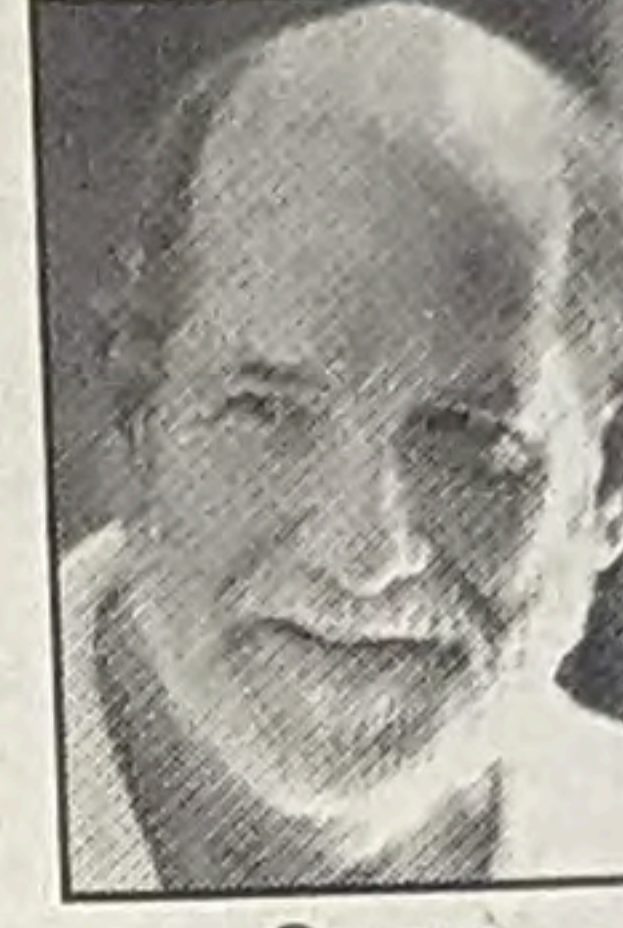
Conley

county schools, as long as it doesn't in any way have a detrimental effect on the city school system," Box said.

At \$188 million in assessed value, the Starkville School District's tax base is four times that of Oktibbeha County at \$49 million.

The county school system has 932 students, and the SSD

said. Bridging the gap between the districts would be a key concern, he said. "We're not opposed to merging the city and



Camp

Act, every one of the SSD's six schools earned a "successful" rating of 3, as of November 2003.

In Oktibbeha County, East Oktibbeha High earned a "low-performing" level 1.

East Oktibbeha Elementary, West Oktibbeha County High and O.L. Wicks Elementary earned "under-performing" level 2. Sturgis Elementary, which has since merged with Wicks, earned a 3.

Dan Camp, a former president of the Starkville School Board, said proponents of consolidation don't realize how many problems it could cause.

"It's not as simple as one might think," Camp said.

The last time consolidation was proposed, at an estimated cost of \$12 million, the SSD had a list of demands to be met, including that it wouldn't necessarily have to hire all the county teachers.

This could've caused legal problems, Camp said.

County students would have had to pay tuition costs and go through enrichment programs.

"They balked at that," Camp said.

Walter Conley, superintendent of the Oktibbeha County School District, said he had no idea what the county board would support, because it's been so many years since the idea has been brought up.

But Camp said there's no other way the SSD — one of the state's best school systems — could have merged with the county district, which has struggled and was put under the state's supervision for several years.

"We have no business merging these two schools," Camp said.

has 3,969.

According to the state department of education, which evaluates school accountability in accordance with the No Child Left Behind

Throughout the years the SSD has developed a wide curriculum, offering Latin classes, dance classes and a string symphony.

"Who wants to bring that quality that we are known to have to a level 2?" Camp said.

But if it found a way to go ahead with the merger, Starkville could see some economic development benefits.

In the case of the Jackson/Madison county merger, Beason said, one of the effects was that the community became "much more attractive for business and industry."

Beason said the city of Jackson "exploded" in economic growth and development after the consolidation, though he added that the school system probably wasn't the only reason behind the growth.

Millicent Mayo, public relations officer for the Natchez-Adams consolidated school district, was a senior in high school when the city and county school systems merged in 1961.

Though she didn't want to go to a different school at first, she said the students made a smooth transition.

"We adjusted fairly well," she said.

Every teacher and student was blended together into the new system.

At Mayo's new high school, the old mascots of the Rams and Colonels became the Bulldogs, and school colors became blue and gold.

One of the downsides Mayo remembers is that school administrators wanted to "start from scratch," so they got rid of some of the city school's old programs. Instead of staging a yearly musical show called "Singsong," the students at the consolidated school went to a musical instead.

But years later, the students that went through that merger think of themselves as a united community.

"It's been a plus, I think," Mayo said.

Supes

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hire Lawrence.

District 3 Supervisor Mike Smith said that for now, he'd like to follow Hairston's recommendation that the departments remain separate.

"Both need some improvement," he said. "It's worth looking into later on to combine this."

District 1 Supervisor and Board President Harry Sanders said the issue definitely needs a closer look.

"I've heard the argument that if it ain't broke, don't mess with it. In my opinion the system we have now is broken," Sanders said.

He listed situations in past years that have shown the need for some type of reform and creation of a chain of command: the poison water scare that nearly shut down Columbus Air Force Base, and the tornado of November 2002.

"Everything runs fine when we don't have an emergency," Sanders said.

When Redmond tried to break into the discussion, she was told she was out of order. The board voted 3-2 to hire

Lawrence and keep the departments separate. District 2 Supervisor Tommy Southerland and Sanders voted against the motion while Brooks, Smith and District 4 Supervisor Jim Terry voted in favor of it.

Brooks then made a motion to authorize Hairston to meet with Lawrence and discuss the best ways to run EMA, and decide what resources are needed.

"What we're trying to do is cure Mrs. Redmond's fear that the world is going to end," Brooks said.

Again, Brooks, Terry and Smith voted for the motion while Southerland and Sanders voted against it.

Sanders questioned why Lawrence should earn the same salary retired EMA director Stanley Clark had received, because he was the county's fire coordinator as well.

Brooks said this was "micromanaging" on Sanders' part.

Hairston said he thought Lawrence should earn the same amount as E-911 Director Jessie Colvin, who supervises 18 people. In an emergency Lawrence could supervise up to 125 people, Hairston said. He added that

the EMA director prior to Clark had earned a salary of \$50,000.

"I'm not playing politics and I'm not playing with people," Hairston said.

■ Heard from Taylor Henry with Access Multimedia Services, who told board members that it would take about \$6,439 in one-time costs to install equipment in the county boardroom to televise board meetings.

This would include one camera on each end of the room, Henry said, which would be necessary in order to show everyone at the table. Six microphones would be included as well. CableOne would televise the meetings for free, Henry said, so that the only additional cost would be for the video cassettes.

"A vote for cameras is a vote for accountability," Henry said. Not only would the board members be held accountable for their actions, Henry said, but members of the public would as well. Citizens could no longer complain that they don't have access to the board meetings.

Brooks said he didn't want to take any action on the issue until the board hears back from the state attorney gener-

al's office.

He said the board's attorney had requested an opinion on whether the board can spend county funds on the video equipment.

Attorney Jeff Smith explained the expenditure must be found to be in the best interest of the citizens.

"That's a no-brainer to me," said District 4 Supervisor Jim Terry.

The board took no action.

■ Tabled a resort status request from the 45 Club on Highway 45 South. The club's owner, Joel Gillentine, asked that the club be granted a resort license.

His attorney, Ellie Word, explained the large number of tourists in the Columbus area should qualify the 45 Club as a resort.

The board of supervisors must first give the business permission to apply to the state tax commission for the license.

Under current regulations, businesses outside the city limits can sell beer but not liquor, and can't sell any alcohol past midnight, Word said.

Brooks moved to table the item until he's had a chance to talk with Sheriff Butch Howard about the club's reputation.