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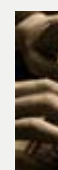
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## INTERACT »

## Schools feud over closings

Friday, September 25, 2009

By MANON L. MIRABELLI

HUNTINGTON - The budget woes that have gripped the tight-knit Hilltown communities within the Gateway Regional School district have pitted towns against one another over the possibility of elementary school closures.

The boards of selectmen and finance committees for the seven district towns, including Russell, Huntington, Chester, Blandford, Montgomery, Middlefield and Worthington, met Wednesday evening for another in a series of discussions over the dilemma that has besieged Gateway families and school officials.

During the discussion that was at times contentious, officials from Worthington and Chester traded harsh words over Worthington's proposal to convert Conwell Elementary School into a private or charter institution.

"We will have a great school system with or without Worthington. If you're threatening (to disassociate from the district), then by all means follow through with it," said Chester Board of Selectmen Chair Michael W. Crochiere.

Joseph L. Boudreau, chair of the Worthington Finance Committee, said that town pays more than the other six member towns for the least number of pupils attending schools.

"I cannot sit here and not bring it up. I cannot sit here and listen to you throw barbs at us when we're paying more than our share," he said. "We want a little bit of credit for the dollars we've paid."

Closing schools, said Boudreau and Worthington Board of Finance member Alex Lak, is not a viable option and will only save the district an estimated \$54,000.

"Everybody has to get off the wagon of school closings and pay up," Boudreau added.

In the face of a significant decrease in state education funding from a 60 percent contribution to the school district to 37 percent, the district is looking at a shortfall of about \$1.4 million.

Public meetings have been conducted since the spring and will continue until the 17-member School Committee comprised of two or three representatives from each town makes a final decision in December. The meetings have revealed that closing schools may not necessarily be a money-saving option if it results in parents opting to send their children to schools out of the district.

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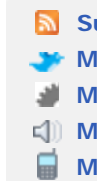
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