

by Stephen Furman

Parallel lines never converge, but they can stretch for equal distances. If the finish line to reach is the consolidation of Districts 3 and 4, the Virden school board and the bi-community committee are running parallel.

The board did not form the committee, nor is the committee an adjunct of the board. The board did not appoint the committee; the committee members are volunteers. Superintendent Ron Graham and the Board have collaborated with the committee whenever it needed information from the district. Numerous contacts have been initiated by both sides. Committee members have attended and spoken at three board meetings, and met informally with school officials at other times.

The Virden board has not yet voted formally on this consolidation measure, but its favorable view toward consolidation has been evident for some time. It willingly participated in the feasibility study with Girard in 2003, only to see the matter more or less stop after one joint meeting. Former Superintendent Jim Kirbach contacted other contiguous districts in 2006 and Virden hosted a meeting of administrators and board representatives in August of that year attended by Waverly, Lincolnwood, Northwestern, and Girard. The former three districts declined to meet further with Virden in those

discussions, preferring to pursue other options. However, the board is still willing to enter discussions with those districts, or others.

In 2007, the administration corresponded further with Girard as a prospective partner, and the board discussed the consolidation options at a board retreat in April of this year. Board members voted unanimously in August to initiate another feasibility study with Girard. The information has been gathered, and the report is currently being written by Dr. William Phillips of the University of Illinois Springfield, who also authored the Girard-Carlinville study. The Virden board will meet with the Girard board whenever this study is completed, perhaps in November or December. At that time, board members will discuss its findings thoroughly, and vote their recommendations. As elected officials, board members must try to reflect the wishes of their constituency while trying to lead citizens to a view of what is best for the students, the ultimate constituency. Members also bring their own views to the board table, and consolidation has been thoroughly discussed by this board, and will be discussed even more in the coming months. So will, if necessary, other options, including but not limited to operating an independent district, or consolidation with other districts.

In brief, board members know that declining enrollment in this district, a trend for nearly twenty years, will eventually and inevitably force restrictive changes. The board will need to reduce the course options again, shrink the staff again, and raise class sizes again to the point where it can no longer offer even an adequate education, much less a good one. Absent community

growth, this trend of decline will accelerate when this year's sixth and fifth grades reach the high school. The board must take steps to address this problem and have a solution in place before it occurs; in other words, the board must anticipate and prevent the problem instead of reacting to it after it's too late for a fix. An ounce of prevention, etc.

So the board has, in fact, been addressing this issue and taking steps to solve the problems of declining enrollment and declining income levels for some years. What the board couldn't have foreseen was the entry of Carlinville into an aggressive campaign for Girard's hand. And the bi-community committee has attempted to respond to that challenge before irreversible action is taken that would leave the Unit 4 board with few or no options for the system's future.

So the committee has floated the petition to assure placing the measure on a ballot in April 2009. Members of the committee presented the essence of the petition and its tax rate proposal to the Virden board in a special meeting last Monday (September 29) and Girard's board last Tuesday (September 30). The tax rate proposed by the committee on the petition is not a board position, and sets a ceiling for, but does not absolutely determine, the possible rates for the merged district. The Unit 4 board or its members cannot comment officially on the tax strategy until it sees the feasibility study, and even then cannot commit any new board to a tax policy. Again, this board has not made, and, until the right time will not make, any recommendations regarding the tax rates. Indeed, final determination of that matter would lie with the new board

of the new district. The Virden board took no official positions regarding the petition or any of its sections, and is neutral. Any other reactions to specific parts of the petition would be premature until board members have seen and digested the feasibility study. Is the board, however, opposed to the petition? Not at all.

Any other considerations, such as administrative appointments, curriculum, faculty make-up, transportation routes, conference affiliation, athletic programs offered, and so on, all would be determined by the new district. Once the vote is held, and if consolidation passes, the two districts can determine how to achieve the transition to the new unified system, but all of those items are the call of respective school officials.

For its part, the Virden board proposes hosting three community meetings to explain its views and its role in these proceedings. The board will prepare a schedule at the October 15 meeting, and set three dates: a pre-feasibility meeting date, a feasibility study informational meeting date, and a meeting date that follows joint sessions with the Girard board to review the study and its recommendations. The board will send letters home with further details, post information on the school website, and perhaps try out the new emergency notification system as well. Public participation is crucial at these meetings, all of which are to be held in the high school-middle school cafeteria, both for explanations and questions.

This board is committed to providing the best possible future for Virden's students. This board is also committed to making informed and reasoned decisions about that future. That future, for the children, must deliver.