

The school scene . . .

School merger proposal merits consideration

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Significant arguments that came out over the \$5.3 million Bonneville School District 93 bond proposal were suggestions for consolidation of all school districts in Bonneville County or removing all areas from District 93 that are located within the Idaho Falls city limits.

Coming from patrons opposing the bonds who reside in District 93 it should lend some weight, even though the bonds carried by better than two to one, or 70.6 percent. Whether opponents want to continue to push such proposals remain to be seen.

It was noticeable the bond proposal did not do well in the more rural areas where farmers reside, ranchers and those with large land holdings, compared, for example, with the many more small suburban and city homeowners who share the tax load.

Even though the bonds carried and new buildings will be constructed to help meet the needs for the time being, it still doesn't solve the longterm problems as the suburban areas continue to grow rapidly while the city student population declines, or at least levels off. However, it is possible the higher Utah Power Co. electric rates may reverse this trend and many seek to live in the city where city power rates are much lower.

Newcomers may not know and many of the oldtimers may have forgotten, but in 1947, when the entire state underwent a traumatic reorganization this proposal for consolidating. Districts 91 and 93 were voted on. This proposal was beaten in a referendum by District 93 patrons by a 2-1 margin.

School districts in the state were reduced in 1948-50 from more than 1,300 to 117 and now is 115.

Bonneville County was one of the worst offenders, having some 32 school districts, the bulk of them housed in the now nostalgic little red school house. They were reduced to the present three, Idaho Falls 91, Bonneville 93 and Swan Valley 92.

The Idaho Department of Education has long had a proposal for consolidation, including one in 1969 drafted by Allen P. Jeffries, acting director of school consolidation but now retired.

His proposal provided for the reduction to between 45 and 50 districts. His proposal called for merger of Districts 91, 93, 92, Shelley 60 and Ririe 252 into a new district 90. This proposal failed to attract much interest and support in the Idaho Legislature and is still wrapped up in mothballs. It has some geographic problems in this fuel-short era, however.

The texture of District 93 is gradually changing from dominating rural to suburban where patrons' interest are more of urban concern. It was these people who pushed over the bond passage.

It is needless to point out that consolidation would bring about tremendous savings, eliminating duplications particularly in administration and extra-

curricular activities. Schools would largely retain their identity, but there would be one school superintendent, not two, and many administrative staff members could be cut in half at a savings of thousands of dollars annually.

Whether the suggested merger of Shelley and Ririe with Bonneville district is feasible is something that needs more study. Ririe split from Jefferson District 251 in a hassle over administration policies a few years ago. Shelley is one of five school districts in Bingham County which also needs drastic surgery for reduction.

The opponents had a strong point in declaring that consolidation or removal of city residents from District 93 could enable sending the overflow of District 93 into available space in District 91 which has been experiencing a declining enrollment.

Swan Valley District 92 which previously had had little taxing problems also was forced to pass a 10 mills override levy.

Despite the 1 percent tax initiative, patrons generally supported their school needs. Idaho Falls 91 two weeks ago and Bonneville 93 last Tuesday passed their large money requests. Snake River, Firth, Teton and Swan Valley approved override levies. Only Madison two weeks ago and Clark County Tuesday turned down proposals for more money.

That means seven school districts of 19 in East Idaho needed to vote for extra money in the form of more levies, bonds or plant facilities. In Idaho, some

40 of the 115 did likewise and most passed.

It does lend credence to the question, however, where is the so-called tax savings from the 1 percent tax limit which was to especially help schools?

Most trustee results pretty well ran as forecast.

In Idaho Falls District 91, Richard G. Helmer won in Zone 2 as predicted but in Zone 1, Beverly T. Branson finished only third to the winner Janell K. Watson and Ivon Fergus in a mild upset. An analysis indicates Mrs. Watson conducted the more intensive campaign to win in a contest where the voter turnout was extremely light and only half of those in most other trustee zones.

In Bonneville 93, there was another slight surprise in Zone 5, the Ucon area, where Gary Simmons, the incumbent, was ousted by Dean Jenkins, and two others trailed. In Zone 1, Sharon L. Affleck nosed out Glen R. Peterson by three votes to hew closely to the forecast that Peterson was favored but that Mrs. Affleck was a strong possibility. Here again, Mrs. Affleck conducted a more intensive campaign. Duane Oswald, as predicted, had little trouble winning over Karen Hague in Zone 3.

It must be observed that all of the school trustee candidates showed public spirit in seeking election for positions that offer no monetary reward, invite frequent abuse and call for responsibilities of long hours and seeking to solve mounting financial problems.