

Merger Bulletin

of the Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools

Issue 2

Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools

October 1, 2003

Commissioners Set Public Hearings for Feedback on School Merger

County Meetings Scheduled on School Merger

October 16	Public Hearing, Chapel Hill High School, Auditorium, High School Road, Chapel Hill, 7:30 p.m.
October 23	Public Hearing, Cedar Ridge High School, 1125 New Grady Brown School Road, Hillsborough, 7:30 p.m.
November	County Commissioners expect to hold Work Session/s on Merger; dates to be determined, check website at www.co.orange.nc.us

The Orange County Board of Commissioners discussed the initial merger analysis September 15 and asked staff to return with additional information.

Commissioners confirmed the dates and locations of two public hearings in October to receive feedback on merger.

Since that time, several groups or individuals have called upon the commissioners to ensure that the public is informed about merger issues and to slow the timetable for making a decision on merger.

Commissioners asked for additional information about school programs, the percentages of students eligible for free and reduced meals at each school and how students might be redistricted.

County Commissioners Can Enact Merger

A majority of the county commissioners, or three of the five commissioners, can decide upon the merger of the Chapel Hill-Carrboro and Orange County Schools. Information prepared for the Orange County commissioners on September 15 showed ways that state laws enables school districts to merge. Merger can occur by action of these groups:

- boards of education within the same county initiate merger
- city school units voluntarily dissolve
- county commissioners initiate merger

For county commissioner initiated merger, local funding for all students must be at the highest level of any administrative unit in the county in the last five years. In addition, local boards of education “shall not participate in preparing, entering into, submitting or agreeing to the plan.”

Furthermore, the plan is not contingent upon approval by voters in the county. In fact, unless the NC General Assembly authorizes such a vote, one should not be held, the information stated. The Chapel Hill-Carrboro PTA Council has endorsed a public vote on the merger issue.

A sample timetable for merger was outlined in the materials:

2003-04: The Board of Commissioners decides upon merger and request state approval.

2004-05: The Board of Commissioners appoints a transition school board to appoint a new superintendent and structure a new school system.

2005-06: Merger takes effect July 1, 2005.

State law allows for funding of central administration, special needs, ESL and vocational education in the separate school systems for two years following the effective date of merger.

Merger Would Require Tax Hike

The analysis prepared by county staff showed that merger would require a tax increase of 17 cents for taxpayers in the Orange County School district. The funds are needed to provide an additional \$1,167 for each student in the Orange County Schools that is now provided to each student in Chapel Hill-Carrboro. The amount is the per student funding of education in Chapel Hill-Carrboro through the district tax.

The district tax has existed in Chapel Hill-Carrboro for about 70 years.

All students in the county are funded at the same rate through the countywide property tax, the primary source of local funding.

The projected tax increase is based on district tax revenues in 2003-04 and assumes that Chapel Hill-Carrboro receives no additional district tax funding until merger occurs.

Funding Equity Emerges as Major Issue Driving Merger

Parent comments in the community have identified the disparity in funding as the overriding issue in the operation of the two school systems in Orange County.

Several commissioners on September 15 noted that the most important issue is that students in both school systems have an equal educational opportunity.

Chapel Hill-Carrboro taxpayers generate an additional \$1167 for each student through a special district tax that is not levied in the rest of Orange County. The Chapel Hill-Carrboro district tax has been

2003 Background on Merger

How did the merger discussion begin?

In January, 2003 at the annual planning retreat of the Board of County Commissioners, commissioner Moses Carey proposed that the commissioners consider whether the Orange County Schools and the Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools should be merged. He stated that he is in support of the merger.

In March, the Board of Commissioners adopted a goal to prepare an analysis of the implications of a potential merger.

On Sept. 15, the commissioners received an analysis and set two public hearings in October to receive feedback on merger.

The board anticipates discussing merger during additional meetings in November and making a decision by the end of the year.

levied for decades to support additional services beyond state, federal and countywide tax sources.

The Orange County Schools have discussed establishing their own district tax several times in recent years. Their most recent discussion occurred in 2002-03.

When the issue came to a vote

before the Orange County Board of Education, member Keith Cook voted in favor of a special district tax, but the measure did not pass.

The Orange County Board of Education cannot levy a tax by itself by could have requested that the Orange County commissioners conduct a referendum for a tax on their behalf.

County Anticipates Merger Could Delay Building Fifth Middle School in Chapel Hill-Carrboro

Written information provided by county analysts indicates that the fifth middle school in Chapel Hill-Carrboro might not be needed in the next ten years if merger occurs.

Orange County Schools plans to open its third middle school in 2006 on property in northwestern Orange County. That middle school or other middle schools in Orange County

could accommodate additional students from Chapel Hill-Carrboro.

Chapel Hill-Carrboro school leaders were not involved in selecting the location of the new middle school. Orange County School leaders were included in the recent search for the third high school site in Chapel Hill-Carrboro.

How to Contact Orange County Commissioners

Orange County commissioners are conducting the forums and studying the issues of merger. They have indicated a desire to hear from the public on this issue. They have the authority to decide on merger and present a merger plan to the State Board of Education. Once the State Board approves the merger, the decision cannot be reversed except by the General Assembly. These are their addresses, including e-mail, and phones:

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Merger Bulletin

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CORRECTION: The first issue of the *Merger Bulletin* stated that the district tax rate had not exceeded 20 cents in its 70-year history. The rate is now at 20 cents but was set at 22 cents from 1999-2001.