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State eyes merger of valley school districts

By Steve Williams

Public hearings likely will be held this winter to gauge local interest in combining Haines and Klukwan into a single consolidated school district. Opinions will be included in the final version of a new state report on school consolidation due in February.

The report, written by the Alaska Local Boundary Commission and Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, was commissioned by the state Senate Finance Committee. A draft version was posted on the Internet this week.

The research is aimed at finding ways to save administrative costs by combining adjacent districts around the state with 250 or fewer students.

It's an idea backed by Gov. Frank Murkowski, who last summer told the Associated Press that some of the state's 53 separate school districts should be consolidated. Currently, 17 districts have 250 students or less.

"Frankly, we have too many school districts in this state. I know it's nice for each community to have its own district, but there are certain limits to how we can best spend our dollars, and reduce substantially administrative costs," Murkowski said.

Haines' and Klukwan's situation provides an example of the potential desirability of merging adjacent, separate school districts through municipal annexation, the report says.

It summarizes the issue of Haines students choosing to attend Klukwan School, taking approximately \$4,000 each in state school funding with them.

"If the Haines Borough annexed Klukwan, the Haines Borough would be responsible for the delivery of educational services to the community. The borough would have the opportunity to consolidate Klukwan and (the Haines Borough School District's) Mosquito Lake School. Consolidating the two schools would result in a student population that would exceed the capacity of Mosquito Lake and would be at or just above the historical capacity of the Klukwan School," the draft report states.

Klukwan village is the only "enclave"—a municipality surrounded by a separate, unrelated government—in the state. The Haines Borough has never formally proposed annexing the village, whose current municipal status was defined in a 1976 amendment to the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act.

Klukwan chose to include its school in the Chatham School District with Angoon, Tenakee Springs, Gustavus, and various logging camps when rural school districts were created in the late 1970s.

Klukwan village has its own five-member advisory board to the Angoon-based Chatham district, and villagers hold tightly to local control over school rules and programs, said former advisory board member Lani Hotch.

"The village and Mosquito Lake people are pretty adamant about having their schools reflect their values. The village feels a lot of ownership of the school, and has a lot of influence. The people want to stay in control of the school."

Haines Borough School Board president Carol Kelly thinks the idea is controversial, but could work as long as Klukwan School's programs are upheld.

"If a Haines board can maintain the type of programs Klukwan has, it could be desirable for Haines. But I wouldn't want to go in and upset what they have going. The purpose of a school district is to serve the needs of the community, and it wouldn't be appropriate to tell people in Klukwan 'you do things the way we want'."

Boundary Commission chair Darroll Hargraves said the commission won't make recommendations to the Legislature on school consolidation until it gathers testimony from small-school communities.

"Our commitment is clear that there will be hearings. The communities will be asked about this before we make recommendations."

Hargraves said the report seeks to question whether some small school districts are cost-effective. "We have to determine what's in the state's best interest. There may be people who step forward from the small districts and say yes, we need to consolidate. There are reasonable people who question why its set up the way it is."

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