

Lyndhurst OKs special ed plan, pool

Friday, December 7, 2007

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LYNDHURST -- The Board of Education has approved an indoor swimming pool and an agreement with the town and a special services school district to return at least 18 of the local district's special-needs students to Lyndhurst.

It was the latest and most complicated of several shared-services arrangements in the township.

Trustees voted unanimously at a joint public hearing Wednesday on three measures. One will transfer four kindergarten classes from the Jefferson School to the newly acquired Knights of Columbus building; another allows the South Bergen Jointure Commission to operate four special-needs classes in the four vacated classrooms, and the third supports the construction of the pool at the high school.

All the moves hinge on the town's recent agreement with the Jointure Commission and the purchase of the Knights of Columbus site, along with the town's ability to negotiate with a developer, seek grants and bypass many of the hurdles a school district faces in such projects, such as a referendum.

"It brings the school into the 21st century," William Barnaskas, a board member, said. "Having a pool and having students return home is a plus. For some special-needs students, it could be used for therapy. ... It could be used by seniors."

Too expensive?

During the two-hour hearing, the \$4.5 million pool was a topic of concern by some who said they felt it was too expensive and that the town had too many other financial obligations.

"That's a long-term commitment," said Doris Vacca. "We can't fight for two or three things at the same time. ... Not right now."

But the majority of the 150 people talked about the town's commitment to return its special-needs children home.

Several spoke passionately about the challenges of raising children with autism and the need to eliminate the chaotic bus rides to other school districts that some experience.

"Sometimes it can take a half-hour or 45 minutes just to get a child on the bus," said Debbie Wertalik, who has an autistic grandson.

Besides the Jointure Commission paying rent, school officials also expect to save about \$1 million a year in tuition and transportation costs when the students return home.

Schools will have another savings because the Jointure Commission has agreed to educate several Lyndhurst students at no charge in exchange for serving several students from outside the district, officials said.

Fast facts

Earlier action: The township agreed to buy the Knights of Columbus building for \$900,000, laying the groundwork for Wednesday's votes on serving special-needs students and building a pool at the high school.

Bonding: The township has approved a \$2 million bond ordinance for the purchase and renovation of the Knights of Columbus building and has introduced a \$4.5 million bond to finance the pool.

What's next: The township will hold a hearing Tuesday on the

"We are not reducing taxes," said Mayor Richard DiLascio, who has brokered several shared-services arrangements between the town and district. "We are using existing dollars and making them work. ... The dollars are there." **\$4.5 million bond.**

In addition to the savings, the pool's funding is expected to come from several other sources, including membership fees and rentals to other high schools and adult swimming, DiLascio said.

Because the school will lease the Knights of Columbus building from the town, township officials expect those rental fees and the savings to cover bonds acquired to pay for the pool and Knights building's purchase by the town.

Several residents said they think the pool will be an added convenience that will save on many other miscellaneous expenses, including recreation costs paid by the town to send children on summer outings.

Annette Bortone, a former trustee who ran a day camp in town for years, said those expenses can add up.

She also plans to use the pool rather than travel to Hudson County three times a week for water aerobics.

"Now I won't have to go to Jersey City," she said. "I look forward to staying home and I can get my shape back again."

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