



The following testimony was given on Monday May 17, 2010 at the Public Hearing of the Assembly Budget Committee on the Fiscal Year 2011 State Budget. This testimony was followed by testimony from school superintendent Rich Fisher. The hearing was held at the UMDNJ – NJ Dental School, Oral Health Pavilion, Newark, NJ. After the statements were read they were followed by a question and answer period lasting more than one hour.

May 17, 2010

NJ State Legislature
Assembly Budget Committee
State House Annex
PO Box 068
Trenton, NJ 08625

Dear Honorable Members of the Assembly Budget Committee,

Good morning. My name is Jim Lavender and I am the Deputy Mayor of Woolwich Township, Gloucester County. Joining me this morning is Rich Fisher, school superintendent for the Swedesboro-Woolwich School District. On behalf of our community thank you for the opportunity to speak to you this morning regarding our unique set of circumstances and inadequate state school aid. The testimony I am about to give on behalf of our communities is vital in preserving quality education programming for all our students. I wish I could say the same opportunities were extended to school districts and municipalities by the executive branch of our government.

According to the United States Census Bureau's most recent population estimates, Woolwich Township remains the fastest growing community in New Jersey as well as one of the fastest growing in the Northeastern United States. Since 2000, our population has more than tripled from 3,032 residents to close to 10,000 residents today.

This rapid growth has put a great strain on a variety of services in Woolwich Township but perhaps nothing compares to the impact our growing population has put on our school system. Since 2002 more than 1,000 students have entered our school system placing great strain on facilities, programming, and staffing, resulting in increased costs to our school district.

In 2002 state support for the Swedesboro-Woolwich School District equaled \$5,127 per student. Since 2002, 1,046 students entered our school system, totaling 1,800 students in our K-6 district. However, state aid has failed to keep pace. In the current budget state aid per pupil equals \$3,550. In the proposed 2010-2011 budget, per pupil state aid is reduced to \$2,863, a reduction over a period of eight years of more than 44 percent.

Throughout this same period our school system continued to implement cost saving measures in an effort to reduce the tax burden while maintaining quality education programs. In the 2009 and 2010 New Jersey Comparative Spending Guide, the



Swedesboro-Woolwich School District was ranked first of 61 K-6 school districts throughout the State as the lowest spending district in regard to total costs per pupil.

Despite these accomplishments, the burden to fund our school district has consistently been shifted to our local tax payers. While per pupil state aid has continued to decrease, property taxes have increased by more than 43 percent since 2002, almost twice the average tax increase per year in the average community, making it increasingly difficult to maintain our quality school system.

Two years ago we believed we found the solution to our problems when our State Legislature, some legislators whom are present this morning, worked hard to remediate the many inequities in school funding with the passage of the School Funding Reform Act (SFRA). The new funding formula promised to fund our schools based on the cost of educating each student to meet core standards, provided additional remedy for students with disabilities, and additional funding for districts experiencing the growth we have experienced.

In 2008 our schools received an additional twenty percent in state aid and as a result adopted a school budget that called for the smallest tax increase in a decade. We were also assured then by Commissioner of Education, Lucille Davy, that our district would be afforded twenty percent increases per year for the next five years until we were made whole. In fact, had the Swedesboro-Woolwich School District been funded per pupil at the per pupil rates of FY 2002, then the local tax burden would be reduced by \$4,048,559, saving the average Woolwich tax payer approximately \$925 annual in local tax dollars.

However, this year is different. With utter disregard to the School Funding Reform Act, Governor Christie has issued blanket 4.99% cuts in operating budgets, regardless of a district's unique circumstances. Faced with a school system that is underfunded by more than \$2.97 million, and the highest property tax increase in our history, I am outraged by the irresponsibility of the Governor's proposed budget and disheartened to think of the devastated school system his plan will leave behind.

Since his address, Governor Christie has stated that cuts in state aid will not harm educational programming. The Governor also stated that wage freezes would help balance district budgets and will not result in additional tax increases.

Ladies and gentleman of the Assembly, I strongly disagree. This year, salary and wage increases total approximately \$450,000, yet the elementary district had imposed upon it a reduction of more than \$934,222 in state aid (15.3% state aid reduction), \$157,797 in debt service aid, and an added debt service assessment of more than \$103,299. This amount in addition to a reduction of state aid in the current budget year totals \$1,755,463 in revenue loss. Even with a wage freeze, the District suffers a budget shortfall of more than \$1.3 million and remains \$2,918,111 below adequacy spending.

By now it is well documented that the schools in the Borough of Swedesboro and Township of Woolwich are historically underfunded. This year's 15.3 percent reduction in state aid for the 2010-2011 school year is outrageous. With respect to fairness, I personally view it as tragic. In comparative analysis of school districts in Gloucester

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County, we have identified another district similar in student population and budgeted expenditures. This district is well above adequacy and receives twice as much state aid per student (\$5,550) as does the Swedesboro-Woolwich School District (\$2,863). I ask members of the legislature, is this the parity you sought with the adoption of SFRA in 2008? Is it fair to shortchange one child because of his mailing address? Why would a district just several miles from our elementary school be afforded more funding per pupil than the district next door?

In the recent weeks, many of our residents have begun advocacy efforts in an effort to preserve our quality school system. For the numerous residents who moved to Swedesboro and Woolwich Township because of our schools, these cuts have been insulting. Those seeking the type of high quality and comprehensive academic and extracurricular programs that we have historically provided may have to look elsewhere in neighboring states in the near future.

Despite the comments made by our Governor, I do not believe that you can have strong communities without strong schools. In fact, it is my strong opinion that the State's sustained failure to adequately fund our public schools has already begun eroding the quality of academic programming, thus devaluing our schools, our community, and our property values. However, because of the historic value that has been placed on education in our community, I remain hopeful that we will work together successfully with multiple stakeholders to find ways to continue to provide our students with the learning opportunities they will need to be successful.

Thank you in advance for your continued support in helping us overcome these regrettable and ill-advised challenges. If any of you should have any questions regarding our plight, please do not hesitate to contact me at your earliest convenience.

Yours in Education,

James J. Lavender, Ed.D.

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Deputy Mayor, Woolwich Township
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Copy: Woolwich Township Mayor and Committee
Swedesboro Mayor and Council
Swedesboro-Woolwich Board of Education