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Southern Regional Funding Agreement, Equity of Island Representation Questioned

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By Gina G. Scala

The validity of a nearly seven decades-old agreement that lays out the financial arrangement for the Southern Regional School District is just one of many questions requiring a deeper dive now that there's a renewed focus on the district's funding sources.

"Some legal opinions have indicated that in the absence of a valid, documented agreement, there is no such binding obligation requiring Long Beach Island communities to remain in the district under the current terms," Surf City Mayor Francis Hodgson said in a Jan. 30 letter to state education officials on the matter. "This raises important questions about both legitimacy and the continuation of the existing structure."

His January letter to Kevin Dehmer, DOE commissioner, came as the Joint Council of Taxpayer Associations of LBI reignited the discussion over the longstanding inequity, asking Island mayors about the possibility of funding a feasibility study to determine steps for a more just relationship and financial commitments earmarked for the mainland district.

The district consists of seven constituent members: Stafford Township and the six Island communities of Barnegat Light, Beach Haven, Harvey Cedars, Long Beach Township, Ship Bottom and Surf City. The cost to each Island municipality to educate its students at Southern Regional is based on property value, not actual per-pupil cost. Waretown, which sends its students to Southern Regional as a sending district, pays an annual tuition per student.

Island students educated at Southern Regional total just 8%, but 80% of the district's revenue is paid for by Island taxpayers. Of the 2,216 students enrolled at Southern for the current school year, only 178 are from the Island, Hodgson added. Waretown accounts for 373 students.

Still, only Long Beach Township officials indicated they would financially support a feasibility study to once again look at options for altering the relationship between the Island and Southern Regional. While Harvey Cedars Mayor John Imperiale said Feb. 3 his town would not be participating, officials there are open to reconsidering if the circumstances change.

In a statement on the school funding issue, the JCTA said Stafford taxpayers currently pay the lowest per-student cost, at \$5,400. At \$17,400 per student, Waretown has the second lowest cost and is the district's only sending-agreement district since Barnegat Township left two decades ago. Financial contributions per student from the Island are Barnegat Light, \$196,000; Beach Haven, \$140,000; Harvey Cedars, \$693,000; Long Beach Township, \$344,000; Ship Bottom, \$104,000; and Surf City, \$182,000.

Harvey Cedars, which has the lowest number of students from the Island at just five, pays the highest per-student cost. The township has the second highest cost, with 65 students enrolled at Southern Regional, according to the JCTA.

"This imbalance alone raises serious concerns about fairness and proportionality," Hodgson wrote in his letter, saying the issue is further compounded by the lack of equal representation.

Stafford Township has seven sitting board members, while the Island has just two.

"In effect, the communities contributing the most funding have the least influence over how those funds are governed and allocated," Hodgson said, adding those inequities in conjunction with the lack of a hard-copy agreement accentuate the need for transparency, equity and a serious re-examination of the Island's relationship with the high school district.

He called for serious discussions between district officials and all the communities within the district.

"These discussions should focus on addressing the existing inequities, particularly with respect to funding and representation," Hodgson said. "At a minimum, Long Beach Island should have representation that is commensurate with its financial contribution to the district."

For many years, Surf City has been aware of and publicly recognized the inequities in Southern Regional's funding structure, he said, adding he didn't believe allocating money to study the well-documented problem would automatically result in substantive changes.

"While Surf City remains committed to finding a fair and lasting solution – and is not opposed to investing resources toward achieving a legitimate goal – it is our position that pursuing a prolonged legal battle would be costly, time-consuming and carry no guarantee of a favorable outcome," Hodgson said, adding, "We believe it is both prudent and responsible to first exhaust all opportunities for constructive discussion and negotiation before considering litigation or other adversarial paths."

The recent interest in Southern Regional's funding comes, in part, from a N.J. Supreme Court case decided in December. In that case, the Supreme Court held "based on the plain language of the relevant statutes, a municipality in Sea Bright's position is a governing body authorized to pursue withdrawal from a school district to form or enlarge a regional district." The decision was rendered Dec. 8, 2025.

Sea Bright is seeking to leave the Oceanport School District, which educates its students from K-8, and the Shore Regional High School District. It is the first district to propose leaving its current educational arrangement under the New Jersey School Funding Reform Act, JCTA President Ron Fiore said.

The formula reform act is the current blueprint and only blueprint the New Jersey Supreme Court has deemed constitutional for all school districts, according to the state Department of Education.

It's unclear how exactly the top court's decision would impact the relationship between the Island and the Stafford Township-based Southern Regional, where middle and high school students from the Island have been educated for nearly seven decades.

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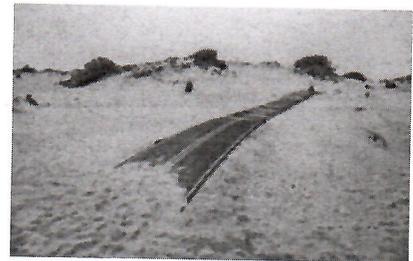
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