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Renewed Interest in Southern Regional Funding Sparks Hope for Change

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By Gina G. Scala

Two decades after the initial push to change the Southern Regional High School District funding formula, and almost 10 years since the last campaign faltered, a coalition of Island taxpayer groups is reigniting the discussion over a longstanding inequity as it seeks a more just relationship and financial commitments allocated for the mainland district.

"This seems like a good time to start the conversation again, given the recent verdict in a New Jersey Supreme Court case and increased interest throughout the Island about understanding the possibilities for change created by the legislation (affirmed in December 2025)," said Ron Fiore, president of the Joint Council of Taxpayer Associations of LBI.

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, 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.

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.

Historically, any request to alter a school funding formula required all municipalities within the district to participate in a special election. That has always put the Island at a disadvantage since there are more registered voters in Stafford Township than in all six Island communities combined.

"I don't know if anything has changed and there's a work-around," Ship Bottom Mayor William Huelsenbeck said last week when he brought the issue to the borough council Jan. 27. "I don't know if we get out and go to Barnegat or Pinelands (Regional). I'm not sure about that."

His comments stem from the letter Fiore sent to each Island mayor requesting support for the commissioning of a non-binding feasibility study to take a look at adjusting the arrangement with Southern Regional.

"Right now, Beach Haven said no; the township said yes; Surf City said they are apprehensive due to the cost; Barnegat Light said no, and Harvey Cedars is waiting to see what the other towns do," Huelsenbeck said last week, adding he would be interested if the referendum aspect of changing the funding formula was not part of the mix.

On Feb. 2, Sherry Mason, Beach Haven borough manager, confirmed officials there "are not on board (with the feasibility study) at this time."

Harvey Cedars Mayor John Imperiale said Feb. 3 his town would not be participating, either. Officials there, however, are open to reconsidering if the circumstances change.

"With Barnegat Light, Beach Haven and Surf City all declining to participate, not only would the cost to Harvey Cedars rise considerably, but the likelihood of any success at all is dramatically reduced since not all LBI municipalities would be involved in pushing for any change to the tax structure," Imperiale said.

He also said he believes a meaningful dialogue between LBI municipalities and Southern Regional should begin immediately, especially as it relates to adequate representation on the regional board of education.

"We should have a voice commensurate with our contribution to the district," he added.

Imperiale said while the idea of LBI towns leaving Southern Regional should not be dismissed out of hand, the preferred solution has always been legislative changes to the formula to something much more equitable than the current system.

"We have been actively working with our state legislators and will continue to do so," he said. "This was never going to be an easy or quick fix, but we believe that you just keep pushing for what is right, as long as it takes."

While the current school funding reform act requires a referendum, it does not require that every town within a school district take part, just the town or towns wishing to leave as well as the receiving district.

Since the Island is considered a constituent member of Southern Regional, meaning its officials at one time voted to unite and form the district, it does not have a send-receive relationship. Waretown, on the other hand, does have a contract with the district to send its students to the district, making Southern Regional its receiving district.

Still, it is unclear if the funding reform act provides a large enough loophole on the referendum issue to move forward.

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

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 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 least 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.

"LBI's annual school tax burden, depending on the municipality, ranges from over \$100,000 to almost \$700,000 per student," Fiore said in his letter to the mayors. "It is, therefore, reasonable and appropriate to review this arrangement."

Additionally, he said the 69-year-old agreement warrants revaluation to slash any unnecessary organizational overhead that keeps tax dollars from the education of students.

"This legislation was enacted to allow school districts to more easily make changes that would ensure that tax dollars are spent on what is important," according to Fiore's letter. "The new legislative process begins with a non-binding feasibility study. This study would evaluate options and include an evaluation of any concerns you may identify."

He said the estimated cost of the study ranges from \$60,000 to \$80,000, which could be apportioned fairly to each LBI municipality.

"This is a small amount compared to the tax dollars every municipality spends on education," Fiore added.

Nearly a decade ago, at a public forum at the Harvey Cedars Bible Conference, Vito Gagliardi, a Morris County-based attorney with a winning record in redefining existing school districts, described the possible actions that could be taken to change the funding agreement with Southern Regional.

Option 1: Put the question before voters. If more say yes than no, then school funding would be changed, he said. However, with Stafford Township controlling six of nine seats on the regional school board, getting this far isn't likely, he said at the time.

Option 2: A local government or elementary school board can make a petition to withdraw from the regional school district. Although a referendum is required to make this happen, it occurs at the local level, he said. Stafford Township or the Southern Regional Board of Education would have no influence over this option. A plan for how and where students would be educated in the future is part of the process.

Option 3: Dissolving a regional school district is similar to the withdrawal process, but it requires a majority of the governing bodies and school boards to agree. As long as there are no constitutional issues, the question would go before voters. A majority vote from all communities is required. It also requires a plan for how and where students would be educated in the future, he said during the forum.

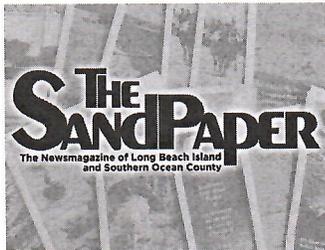
Conceivably, in the last option, the Stafford Township Elementary School District could become a K-12 district and enter into a sending agreement with the Long Beach Island Consolidated and Beach Haven school districts. If the Island communities agreed to withdraw from Southern Regional, they could enter into a sending agreement as well, he said.

— Gina G. Scala

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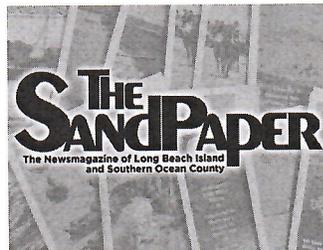
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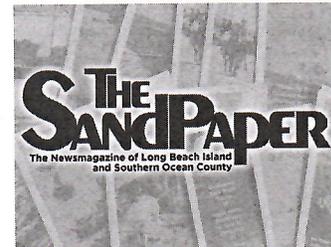
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