

Future Of CPCS Hazy

Shrinking Rural School Seeks Colton, Pierrepont Help

By LARRY ROBINSON
COLTON - An adhoc group being formed to look for ways to breathe new life into the Colton-Pierrepont Central School District will include representatives of the Colton town board, the Pierrepont town board and local school officials when it holds its first official meeting later this month.

The joint meeting will be held on March 18 at the school cafeteria at 6 p.m., according to school Superintendent Martin Bregg.

Bregg said he is formally inviting town officials from both Colton and Pierrepont in hopes of initiating dialogue on how to offset his school district's dwindling student population.

He predicts that in just two years from now the school district's population

will have shrunk to a mere 300 students or less.

Bregg has been sounding alarm bells in and around Colton in recent months regarding what he predicts is an uncertain future for the tiny rural district. He says declining student enrollment means shrinking state aid dollars at budget time which then translates into district spending cuts balanced against growing operational costs.

It is a less than ideal mathematical scenario that unless remedied, could some day play a role in collapsing the quiet rural district, according to Bregg.

If that happens, he says, it would be a calamity the community can ill afford.

"The school is the largest employer. It is also the center of activity. It's the com-

munity meeting place," explained Bregg. "If we lose the community school, it will of course impact the town."

There are 42 teachers employed at Colton-Pierrepont Central and eight assistant teachers, according to Bregg, as well as roughly 30 staff members including bus drivers, custodians, cleaners, cafeteria workers, secretaries and clerks.

All told there are approximately 80 full and part time workers employed by the district, sitting nearly smack dab in the middle of the historic Raquette River hamlet of Colton.

Pierrepont Town Councilman Carmen Casolara is one of the local government officials residing in the district that plans to attend the

\$120K Cut, More To Come

By LARRY ROBINSON

COLTON - School officials at Colton-Pierrepont central say they have managed to trim about \$120,000 from their projected 2008-09 budget, effectively chiseling down what would have been a 9 percent hike in the tax levy to about 6 percent.

However, school officials say the tax levy increase is still unacceptable and plan to pare down the budget even more in coming weeks if possible.

"If we could get the increase down to about five percent the feeling is that that may be doable," said school Superintendent Martin Bregg.

Colton-Pierrepont is grappling with trimming what was originally projected to be a \$490,000 operating increase next year over the current year's spending plan.

The nearly half million dollar jump over last year's budget is due in part to rising costs related to fuel, labor and insurance and a sizable jump in special education costs from BOCES.

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March 18 meeting to talk about how to help bring more families into the area to boost Colton-Pierrepoint's student population.

Casolaro said he plans to listen to Bregg and others at the meeting and will likely offer some of his own opinions related to the school's dilemma, but he admits immediate answers may be hard to come by.

He also wonders out loud how much taxpayers in the township of Pierrepoint can actually pony up to help.

"People living in Pierrepoint are supporting four districts," said Casolaro. "Colton, Potsdam, Edwards

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- Martin Bregg

and Canton. It's difficult for Pierrepoint.

"Pierrepoint is a pretty big township but not when it's divided into four school districts," he said.

But discussions at the March joint meeting are expected to cover more than just the topic of tax dollars in the community, according to Bregg. Although he says that subject is likely to be broached, perhaps in a variety of different ways, he sug-

gests the community's real long term hope lies in sparking a broader, more free-wheeling discussion of how to make Colton an attractive, affordable and desirable place to live.

"We need to draw some young families into the area," points out Bregg. "We've had people move out because there is no work."

He adds, "What generates state aid is student enrollment."

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On top of those increases, the district will also have to offset a projected \$40,000 decrease in state aid revenue, according to Bregg.

He said the recent \$120,000 in budget cutbacks imposed by the school board include cut-

ting back on sports equipment purchases, deeper cuts to the teacher materials and supplies account, and shifting some teaching duties once outsourced to BOCES back to the local district.

He said the next budget discussions will take place at the district's upcoming school

board meeting on March 19 at the high school cafeteria.

He said the sports equipment and teacher supply cutbacks alone will save about \$7,000.

"We are not cutting any sports, we are just reducing the budget by not purchasing as much equipment," he said.