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JCTA Urges LBI Mayors To Support Feasibility Study

LONG BEACH ISLAND – The Joint Council of Taxpayers Associations of Long Beach Island (JCTA) has urged the mayors of the six Long Beach Island towns to commission a feasibility study to explore options around changing the island’s relationship with the Southern Regional School District (SRSD). A letter encouraging support of the study was sent to each LBI mayor in mid-January by JCTA President Ron Fiore. The feasibility study would consider the impact of a full range of options and offer conclusions about the results of each change, including, but not limited to, ensuring that unnecessary organizational overhead does not divert tax dollars from educational quality and the financial impact on taxpayers.

“This seems like a good time to start the conversation again,” said Fiore, “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 by this recent decision.”

Fiore noted that LBI provides only 8% of the student body but contributes 80% of the school district’s revenue, which comes from the regional school district tax. Stafford Township and the six LBI municipalities – Barnegat Light, Beach Haven, Harvey Cedars, Long Beach Township, Ship Bottom and Surf City – are part of the SRSD, whose total enrollment for the 2025-26 school year is 2,216 students, with only 178 from LBI. Waretown has a sending contract with the school district and pays a tuition fee for each of its 373 students.

Financial contribution per student varies widely, depending on the town. Stafford Township currently pays the lowest, at \$5,400 per student, followed by Waretown with \$17,800 per student in tuition. LBI towns pay the highest per student costs (rounded to the nearest thousand): Ship Bottom \$104,000; Beach Haven \$140,000; Surf City \$182,000; Barnegat Light \$196,000; Long Beach Township \$344,000; and Harvey Cedars \$693,000. The number of students from each LBI municipality varies, ranging from five from Harvey Cedars to 65 from Long Beach Township. While the regional school tax rate does not vary greatly between LBI towns, the wide range of per student costs can be attributed to the differences in total property valuations and number of students from each town.

When the SRSD was created in 1957, the population of Long Beach Island was about three times larger than the population of Stafford Township. Accordingly, when that ratio and the valuation of properties in each area were considered, LBI taxpayers were deemed responsible for 80% of the required funding and Stafford the remaining 20%, and property owners were taxed accordingly. Surrounding municipalities became sending districts without a tax obligation, instead paying tuition for each student attending. This 80/20 funding ratio has not been revised since it was established 69 years ago.

Currently, LBI students attend elementary school in one of the two schools on the island through fifth grade. From there, they move to the middle school in the SRSD and then, in ninth grade, to Southern Regional High School in Stafford Township.

Typically, in past years when municipalities wanted to consider changing their arrangement with their current school district, a referendum would be required involving all the municipalities in the school district. New Jersey’s School Funding Reform Act (SFRA) revised several existing policies, however, which affects who would be involved in a vote about potential change. Under the SFRA, if a town wishes to leave its school district, only the taxpayers of that town and the town in the receiving school district are eligible to vote in the referendum that decides, not all the towns in the school district.

The first town to leave its school district under the SFRA was Sea Bright NJ. In a matter that went all the way to the NJ Supreme Court, the verdict was rendered in favor of Sea Bright. The attorney who represented Sea Bright was joined by a NJ State attorney, solid proof of NJ’s support of these efforts to create school districts that offer grades K 12 instead of maintaining partial districts that include only a few grades, such as K - 6 or grades 5 – 8, for example.

“The JCTA is the logical group to encourage participation in a feasibility study,” said Fiore. Founded in 1968, JCTA, is comprised of representatives from all eleven taxpayer associations on Long Beach Island. Its representatives work collaboratively to identify and address issues that mutually affect all property values and life experiences on LBI and to encourage communications between member taxpayer organizations.

Fiore was clear that decisions about whether to act on any changes proposed by the feasibility study would come from the LBI’s municipal mayors and could ultimately need to involve a referendum. “The feasibility study is non-binding,” he said, “It provides a comprehensive analysis of what is possible and the pros and cons only as a place to start.”