

15-Jan-2008 The Coalfield Progress
St. Paul, Pound folks support their schools
JODI DEAL / Coalfield Progress Staff Writer

Some residents of St. Paul and Pound feel the same way their neighbors in Appalachia do — the closing of community high schools is a death knell for small towns.

In St. Paul, a new organization calling itself “Voice for Community Schools,” started by members of the St. Paul High School Alumni Association, is lobbying for a plan that would leave its high school untouched.

Spokesperson Suzy Harrison said in a Monday telephone interview that her organization is supporting an option former school board member Kyle Fletcher dubbed “the mixed bag” — build new schools in Coeburn, Powell Valley and Wise, renovate Appalachia and Pound, and leave St. Paul, the newest high school, alone.

“Not only are we trying to save our school — we’re trying to save our town,” Harrison said. “I’m not sure if everyone realizes what closing a school would do to our community. One of our neighboring communities had a power plant. They lost their school, and they’re now virtually a ghost town.”

Harold Greear of Pound, who organized a meeting in his community in late December, told a group of Appalachia citizens rallying against consolidation Saturday night that he’s totally against consolidated schools.

Renovation is the only fair option, Greear said, pointing out that plenty of coal severance tax money comes from the county’s smaller communities — Pound, St. Paul and Appalachia. Those towns are ravaged by coal trucks and mining activity, but see little of the road improvements and economic development funds created by severance tax revenue, he asserts.

“A group of us are talking to our legislators. There’s no reason we couldn’t spend this money on our high schools,” Greear said, noting that no matter what the board of supervisors and the school board say, there’s still the option of appealing to the Virginia General Assembly for help.

GATHERING SUPPORT

Harrison reported that about 100 people attended her organization’s first official meeting, which was held Thursday night at St. Paul Town Hall.

Greear’s late December meeting drew about 25 supporters, including representatives from Appalachia. No St. Paul representatives attended the Saturday night Appalachia meeting.

The St. Paul and Pound efforts both stress the same key message as anti-consolidation activists in Appalachia do — turn out in big numbers for school board and board of supervisors meetings. Call your elected officials. Make your voice heard.

“We need to let them know we’re not going to go down without a fight,” Harrison said, later noting that all St. Paul town officials are behind Voice for Community Schools 100 percent.

Harrison says her organization is also considering taking out full-page ads in local newspapers and setting up meetings with the editorial boards of newspapers.

Greear is encouraging those against consolidation to bring the subject up in conversation and tell people who support it why it should be opposed.

“People think this stuff will be done for free, but our taxes will be doubled or tripled,” Greear told Appalachia

citizens Saturday night. He noted that costs for a new consolidated school in Harlan County are spiraling out of control, and suggested that Dickenson County's consolidation plans have been stalled because of lack of funding.

Both Greear and Harrison planned to attend a Monday night school board meeting, which was still in session at press time.