

Megavoke OK'd, meals tax denied in Danvers

By Ethan Forman

Staff writer

August 25, 2009 09:15 am

DANVERS — Danvers last night became the first major North Shore community to give its blessing to the megavoke merger, which some said was fitting given that the town stands to play host to the proposed \$133.7 million vocational school project.

Special Town Meeting, in a rare summer session, gave its unanimous consent.

"I'm thrilled," Town Manager Wayne Marquis said after the meeting. "Somebody's got to move first." Marquis is chairman of the temporary oversight board charged by the Legislature in 2004 with shepherding the merger to fruition.

"The vote we are taking tonight to accept \$98.6 million from the state to build a new agricultural and technical high school on the campus of Essex Aggie ... will strengthen and build a more skilled and diverse work force for the future," said Selectman Dan Bennett, who sits on the board of Essex Agricultural and Technical High School.

Town Meeting members also gave their consent to raise the local hotel-motel room tax by 2 percent, a move expected to bring in an additional \$210,000 in tax revenue this fiscal year alone. By accepting the hotel/motel tax before Sept. 1, Danvers stands to capture three months of additional revenue.

It was not all "ayes" last night, however. Members shot down a 0.75 percent increase in the meals tax after a lengthy debate in which Selectman Keith Lucy tried and failed to earmark the money to restore police and fire cuts, cuts to the schools, and the town's revenue stabilization fund.

Town Moderator Pat Fraizer ruled Lucy's amendments beyond the scope of the article. The tax would have meant \$225,000 to \$250,000 in added cash this year, though Selectman Mike Powers, who opposed it, said the tax should be reconsidered in the future when the economy improves.

But Town Meeting was convinced that now is the time for the megavoke.

The merger involves the state-run Essex Aggie, the 16-community North Shore Technical High and Peabody's high-school vocational programs. If approved, they would join forces in a state-of-the-art, 1,440-student, 380,000-square-foot school on Essex Aggie's campus on Route 62. The plan has been in the works for more than a decade.

"It would be a great opportunity for us to join," said Gideon Ofori-Asante, who came from Africa in 1996 and who said his education at North Shore Tech allowed him to become a union carpenter.

Frank Tyrrell, a former Danvers representative to the North Shore Tech School Committee for 24 years, said he dreamed of the schools' merger in the 1970s, but Essex County politics squashed that plan.

"I am glad my dream has come true," said Tyrrell, who is in his early 90s.

Town Meeting member Mark Zuberek, however, raised some concerns about the plan regarding traffic and benefits to the town, but he still voted for it.

The plan needs approval from communities that represent 75 percent of North Shore Tech's enrollment in 2004 for it to become a reality.

Danvers is the third largest community in the district, behind Salem and Beverly, sending 91 students to the vocational and agricultural high schools. Peabody, if it joins the district, would become the largest community at 235 students, but Bennett said if, for some reason, the city does not join, the school project could be scaled back.

Communities that don't join the district would have no school district voting rights. In addition, towns and cities outside the district would pay a higher tuition rate to send their kids to the megavoke.

Bennett said the merger would save more than \$1 million in transportation costs, \$200,000 from the capital budget and \$820,000 from the expense of having North Shore Community College on Essex Aggie's campus.

There would also be \$180,000 in maintenance savings, plus 30 percent to 50 percent savings in energy costs from having a new building.

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Burning over job cuts

With additional meals tax revenue on the table at last night's Special Town Meeting, dozens of firefighters wearing red T-shirts turned out to protest cuts to two police officers and two firefighters this spring.

They stood outside Holten Richmond Middle School holding signs such as "Seek the facts and expose the lies" and "Dictating is not negotiating," and then came into the meeting and sat in the back.

"We feel the truth hasn't gotten out," said firefighter Brian Barry, president of the Danvers Firefighters Association, before the meeting. Town employee unions were asked to accept a salary freeze in return for a guarantee of no layoffs amid a budget shortfall. Some unions did, some did not.

"We did offer to give up our year-three raise," Barry said, "and we wanted to negotiate a schedule change. ... That could save the town money." For whatever reason, the proposal did not come to fruition and two firefighters were laid off.

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