

Published: 06/12/2006

Obstacles remain for Tech-Aggie merger

By Nelson Benton
Staff writer

Members of the Northeast Legislative Caucus are sold on the idea of a new regional school that would incorporate North Shore Technical High School, the Essex Aggie and Peabody Vocational High School.

So are most city and town officials. Beverly Mayor Bill Scanlon says "there's no higher priority in the whole region."

The North Shore Chamber of Commerce, representing many of the region's leading businesses, is foursquare behind it; and so, too, are the construction trades unions.

North Shore Community College President Wayne Burton and his Salem State counterpart, Nancy Harrington, see it as providing a natural transition to the career-oriented degree programs offered by their institutions.

Still to be convinced, however, are the people who will ultimately pay the bill for the rehabilitation and expansion of the Aggie campus to accommodate the additional students.

Every year, hundreds of area teens anxious to leave high school with training as an electrician, auto mechanic, mason or similar trade are turned away from North Shore Tech and the Aggie for lack of adequate space in their classrooms. Nor do students here have the choice of programs available to their peers in other parts of the state.

The result is a shortage of skilled workers that acts as a further drag on the region's economy. Brian Cranney, who counts himself as one of the proposed school's fiercest advocates, said he was forced to open a new office for his contracting business in New Hampshire, because "that's where the work force is."

There is an intense lobbying effort underway both on Beacon Hill and in Washington to obtain state and federal funds for the new entity. Still, no one is quite certain what the reaction will be where it counts - at town meetings and in city council chambers - when it comes time for members of the regional district to pony up their share of construction and operating costs.

A couple of suggestions that might help sell the project:

- * Member communities should agree to put all proceeds earned through the sale of the present North Shore Tech campus on Log Bridge Road in Middleton into the new school. That will by no means cover the entire cost, but it would constitute a significant show of faith in the project.

- * The new school's charter should be rewritten so that representatives from the member cities and towns are elected, rather than appointed. Requiring these officials to put their names on the ballot would enhance their credibility within their respective communities and make them more accountable to taxpayers - which is critical when it comes to discussing budget issues.

A lot of people have put a tremendous amount of time and energy into the planning for the new school. What's needed now are hard figures as to how much the feds, the commonwealth and member municipalities will have to pay, a realistic timetable for consolidation and construction, and a vote by somebody, somewhere declaring, "We're in!"