

Funding Dominates School Board Concerns During Year

BY SUSAN USHER

Money woes for the county school system overshadowed much else on the education scene in Brunswick County during 1993, but there were some bright spots.

The brouhaha over funding for the schools climaxed in August when Chief Superior Court Judge William C. Gore ordered the school board and county commissioners into mediation to reach a compromise on the budget following a formal appeal by the schools. After more than 14 hours of negotiations with the help of a professional mediator, the two boards reached an agreement that satisfied neither party entirely.

The schools would take funds from its capital budget set aside for furniture, equipment, two yellow buses and replacement maintenance trucks and use it instead to meet day-to-day operating expenses, while continuing to search for budget cuts.

The county would allocate \$500,000 initially for Leland Elementary School site acquisition, architectural fees and engineering fees. If the two boards could reach agreement before the end of the fiscal year on a means of funding that project, plus others in the long-range plan, another \$365,000 would be advanced so work could continue.

Meanwhile the school system and county executive officers, finance officers and board chairpersons were to begin communicating more frequently through regular meetings as well as calling occasional joint meetings of the two boards.

Superintendent Ralph Johnston's first budget, for \$19.25 million, had reflected his and the board's ambitious goals for staff and curriculum reorganization and hiring of "lead" teachers, and implementing the first phase of a 10-year capital needs program identified earlier in the year.

The board asked county commissioners to fund an \$11.4 million operating budget, plus \$4 million in local money and \$2.1 million in state half-cent sales tax money for capital needs. Those included \$3 million each toward construction of a Leland elementary school and renovation and expansion of West Brunswick High School, and funds to expand the schools' use of technology for instruction, management and communication.

Commissioners came through with a 5 percent overall increase at a time when they were asking other departments to cut back that amount, but the school board

said the \$7.8 million operating and \$576,000 capital outlay allocations wouldn't cover a "status quo" budget, much less improvements, because of pay increases it had granted earlier to clerical workers, plus a pay raise for state employees that it needed to match for locally-paid teachers.

As the school board looked for places to cut, commissioners restored \$1 million to the budget for the technology/computers program.

But the school board felt strongly that it didn't have enough money to operate the schools given the demands from both the local community and the state to improve performance. It launched a formal appeal for an additional \$4.8 million, as originally requested, despite warnings from board member Thurman Gause that the move could cause long-term damage to relationships with the county commissioners.

Following the marathon mediation session held at Brunswick Community College, Commissioners' Chairman Don Warren was to repeatedly urge the schools to get on with both reorganization of the central office staff, which he indicated was top-heavy with locally-paid administrators, and the Leland school project, which was delayed by renewed site negotiations with the State Ports Authority.

In November, after identifying state half-cent sales tax funds left over from the Southport cafeteria, Supply Elementary School and central office funds, the schools asked commissioners to allow them to use that money to buy school furniture and equipment cut from the budget earlier. Instead, with little discussion, commissioners allocated all \$308,000 to the Leland elementary school project, and soon after began publicly pressing the school board to begin talks on the 1994-95 budget.

At calendar year's end a site for the Leland school had not been settled on, but the school board had approved a plan for reorganizing the instructional services staff.

The plan by Assistant Superintendent for Instruction Jan Calhoun called for eliminating five staff director or coordinator positions and creation of five new positions, at a projected savings of \$113,475 in county funds. The five individuals displaced by the reduction in force were to have top priority in hiring for other jobs for which they were qualified, at lower salaries.

But the plan, which would eliminate the jobs of two black mid-level managers, was attacked by the Southport-Brunswick County Branch of the NAACP, which said the move was contrary to efforts to increase the presence of black administrators and teachers in the school system.

It wasn't the first time black community leaders had attacked a staffing decision during the year.

When Superintendent Johnston began reorganizing his staff in early summer, he sparked protests and the threat of a back-to-school boycott of black students.

Johnston brought in two principals from outside the state, shifted longtime Lincoln Elementary School Principal Joe Butler to a central office post as migrant education/parent involvement coordinator, and hired Calhoun to replace Assistant Superintendent Mose Lewis, a black assistant who had retired.

The boycott was called off at the last minute following establishment of a diversity/minority recruiting task force and discussions with school officials during which "no deals were made," according to school board Chairman Donna Baxter.

Several months later several positions were consolidated to reinstate a third assistant superintendent's post eliminated several years ago. Hired as Assistant Superintendent for Student Services and Support Personnel was black educator Oscar Blanks, longtime Chapter 1 director for Bladen County Schools and the North Carolina Association of Educators' 1993 Administrator of the Year.

The tone for the year had been set at the school board's first meeting in January, when it took most of the money set aside toward construction of a long-delayed new central office and used it to meet the immediate needs of three individual schools: a new cafeteria and classroom renovations at Southport Elementary held over from the year before; ventilation system repairs at Lincoln Primary School, where much of 1993 was spent trying to improve indoor air quality; and a new roof for a 10-classroom wing at Union Elementary School.

Lack of appropriate facilities on high school campuses had prompted the school system to schedule high school commencement exercises at the Odell Williamson Auditorium at Brunswick Community College. But it was just as well that most of the county's 590 seniors voted to continue holding graduation outdoors on their own campuses; the auditorium was still not completed at the end of the year.

A potential confrontation was defused when a June 7

U.S. Supreme Court ruling clarified the status of prayer at school graduation exercises. It cleared the way for South Brunswick High School senior Jason Lanier to lead classmates in a recitation of The Lord's Prayer at commencement. If necessary, he had planned to defy authorities and lead the prayer during a scheduled moment of silent prayer.

Along with growth-related pressures to expand facilities, the school system faced increased expectations for student performance both from the public and the N.C. Department of Public Instruction.

While overall scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) were up by 25 points, the schools didn't get good news on its 1992 "report card" by the state department.

Brunswick County Schools were one of only 14 systems statewide to rank both below the state average and below par, or below similar systems. It had the lowest overall performance of any school system in southeastern North Carolina. The bright spot: the lowest drop-out rate of any county in the region. The low spot: failing to meet minimum standards for the number of students passing Algebra I and U.S. History end-of-year tests and sixth grade writing essays, issuing more certificates compared to diplomas than the state standard, and slightly below-standard attendance.

Near year's end, before receiving its first report card under Superintendent Johnston, the school board awarded the superintendent a \$2,500 bonus for a job well done, a bonus he pledged to share with those who had helped with school system achievement.

During the year the school system had completed re-vamping of its personnel and student conduct policies, and established a safety task force and hotline, laying the groundwork for future improvements.

The schools reached a collaborative effort agreement with UNC Wilmington's School of Education aimed at improving new and continuing teacher education, and was party to two major grants and an endowment announced in the fall. As a result of a major REA grant, West Brunswick High School will be one of the sites added to the Cape Fear Educational Partnership Network interactive video project, part of the state's rapidly growing "information highway."

Another \$500,000 grant will fund efforts to deter growing violence in the schools by teaching students how to resolve conflicts by peaceful means.

The schools also received a \$100,000 endowment from Odell and Virginia Williamson to ensure continuation of the annual oratorical contest scholarship awards given annually in their names since 1972.

Auditorium Problems Plague Community College During '93

BY SUSAN USHER

Construction problems with the Odell Williamson Auditorium hung over Brunswick Community College during 1993 like the proverbial millstone, casting a pall and taking time and energy away from other concerns.

Ground was broken in September 1989 for the 1,500-seat, 32,773-square-foot community facility. Construction began in August 1991, with every expectation the auditorium would be ready for use in fall 1992.

General contractor Hatcher Construction Co. of Fayetteville missed its first and second deadlines, then in April 1993 was declared in default after having failed to show "substantial progress." BCC Trustees turned the project over to ITT Hartford, the insurance company holding the performance bond. Little changed. Hatcher remained on the job until November 1993, when replaced by Graka Inc. of Whiteville at "cost plus 15 percent" to complete a long punch list of items.

Consultants advised trustees it could cost as much as \$180,000 to complete the building, site work and a separate water line that had to be run to the auditorium from U.S. 17 Business because of errors made in design of the sprinkler system.

The college footed the extra costs for the moment, with the possibility of legal action being required to settle the matter later.

BCC used the auditorium temporarily on several occasions before closing it in November for sprinkler system modifications and other remaining work. The college held its

own graduation in the auditorium Aug. 20, with a fire truck on standby to meet state code specifications for fire protection. The first of a handful of paying customers was Brunswick Electric Membership Corp., which held its annual meeting there Oct. 9.

Completion costs weren't the only expenses posed by the auditorium. Trustees asked county commissioners for slightly over \$1 million, a 61.5 percent increase in funding, with much of it earmarked for furnishing and operating the auditorium.

With support from county commissioners, individual and corporate donors, BCC completed interior renovations of classroom and office space at its Southport campus and set its sights on related exterior improvements.

In November, passage of a state-wide bond issue assured a source of funding for BCC's next construction project, an allied health/classroom building about the size of the ALS Building. Work could begin sometime in 1994.

College officials attributed a slight decline in fall and winter quarter enrollment to the area's improving economy, but heard trustees' urgings to see that course offerings are appropriate for local needs. New allied health courses drew their maximum allotment of students, while approximately 30 high school students enrolled in technical and

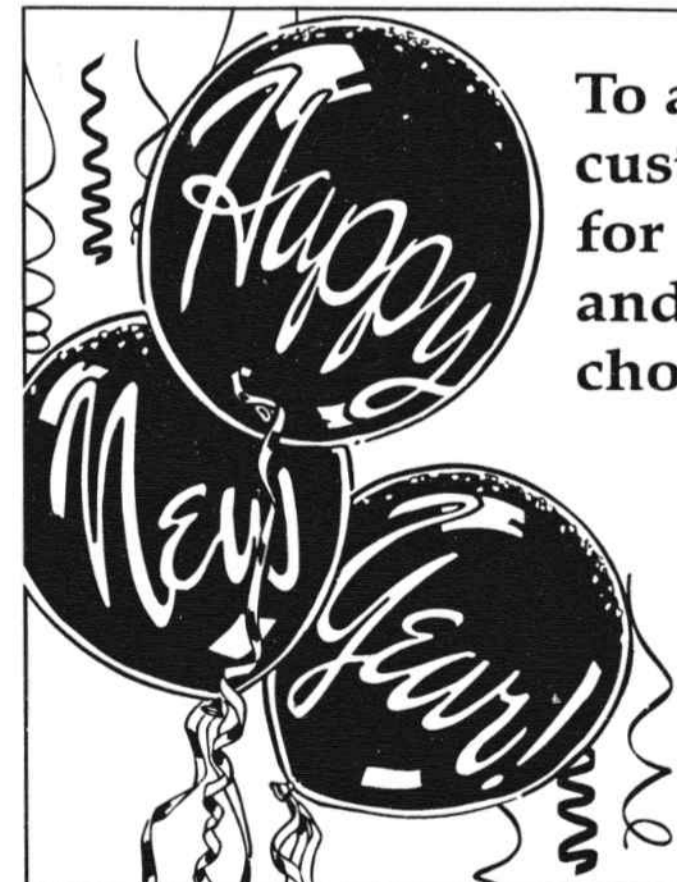
vocational courses each quarter under a new Tech Prep agreement with the public schools.

Work proceeded on efforts to establish an aquaculture curriculum, with the program proposal on the January 1994 agenda of the State Board of Community Colleges.

Fall also saw higher fees, shorter hours and some "self supporting" community service classes in the Continuing Education Department, reflecting changes in state policy. The state cited examples such as one uncovered at BCC in a class audit. State officials said an automobile mechanics class attended by the same students each quarter should have been listed as an avocational or hobby class, not as a vocational class earning the college funding credits. On average students had repeated the class 27 times each.

Jerry Thrift was hired as full-time dean of continuing education after the post had been vacant nearly 2½ years, with Small Business Center Director Velma Jenkins named assistant dean.

In the first case of its kind at BCC, business instructor Jane Page filed suit Sept. 29 against the college for not renewing her contract for the fall term. Page said she had been wrongly dismissed for being outspoken and standing up for students, and that her due process rights had been violated. The case had not gone to court as of late December, but BCC had dropped its protests of her unemployment claim after Page changed her application to read "contract not renewed" instead of "terminated."



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