

GRIEVANCE HEARING SET

Board, On Split Vote, Rejects Motion To Reinstate Benton

BY SUSAN USHER

A motion to reinstate former school maintenance supervisor Odell Benton pending further investigation failed on a 2-3 vote of the Brunswick County Board of Education Monday night.

Member Polly Russ said she didn't know "how it would go" when she made the motion just as Chairman Donna Baxter began to adjourn the meeting at Shallotte Middle School, even though the personnel issue had been discussed in closed session.

Member Yvonne Bright joined Russ in voting for the motion, with members Thurman Gause, Donna Baxter and Bill Fairley voting against it.

Approximately 75 people attended the meeting in the school media center, many of them in a show of support for Benton. Only a few visitors were present when the board returned to open session just before 10 p.m. after meeting for more than two hours behind closed doors on personnel and other issues.

Immediately after the board vote, Glen Peterson, the school board's attorney, told reporters that since Benton's appeal was pending before the board, it would not be appropriate for the board to interfere in the decision made by the superintendent.

The board plans to hear Benton's

appeal in closed session Tuesday, Jan. 18, at 5 p.m. at the central office in Southport.

"This whole thing has obviously escalated," said Russ later. "I think maybe it was a quick decision. I was hoping we could reinstate him and then investigate further if that was warranted. We need to bring closure to this and make a decision."

"I just felt it was something I should do."

Russ said that while she believes the board should be united, that with five members there are times when they are going to disagree on how to get something done, and that sometimes those differences will be noticeable in public. "I've come to understand that it's alright for us to do that," she said.

On Dec. 17, just before the schools began a two-week holiday, Benton was notified he was being fired, effective Jan. 3, for his alleged role in the improper sale last July 20 of school-owned property to a Long Beach restaurant owner and operator.

He has since filed a grievance against the board, saying he was not involved with the sale and should be given back his job.

Benton said that when restaurant owner Jarvis Jones, who is his brother-in-law, inquired about buying the equipment, he referred Jones

to Rebecca Brandon, child nutrition director.

After inspecting the equipment, which had been removed to the maintenance garage from the Southport Elementary School cafeteria during renovations, Jones contacted Brandon and eventually bought the items for \$350.

When Jones called the maintenance department to see if it could deliver the equipment, Benton said he and his fellow supervisor, Babson, agreed because that was a courtesy extended to other purchasers.

Jones presented his receipt and a list of items purchased and the items were loaded for delivery. Jones asked for delivery not to his restaurant, but to a restaurant supply business in Wilmington, owned by a nephew. School officials learned later that 12 of the 46 items sold to Jones were later resold through the business for \$7,800.

The initial sale violated school system procedure, since the items had not been declared surplus by the school board, then advertised for sale or auction to the public.

Benton was fired, the school system has filed suit against Jones in an effort to recover the cafeteria equipment or its cash value, and Brandon, who said she didn't know the proper procedure for disposal of property, was reprimanded.



STAFF PHOTO BY SUSAN USHER

First Baby Of '94

Taylor Brett Buffkin, Brunswick County's first baby of the year, arrived at The Brunswick Hospital at 1:01 p.m. Jan. 4, weighing 8 pounds and measuring 21 inches long. Shown above with his mother, Taylor is the son of Jane and James Buffkin of Grissetown, and has a brother, Jordan, 3. Taylor and his parents received a package of gifts provided by the hospital, its auxiliary and local merchants.

Deadline For Personal Tax Listing Jan. 31

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member that all personal property should be listed for tax purposes by Jan. 31. That includes boats, farm equipment, business personal property and single-wide trailers. Double-wide mobile homes are listed as real estate. A 10 percent late-listing penalty will be added to the tax bills of those who fail to return the form this month.

Licensed motor vehicles are no longer included in the January listing. Owners will receive tax information on their vehicles when they renew their annual registration.

Tax Supervisor Boyd Williamson suggested that anyone who is new to the county and did not receive a tax listing form should call the county tax office.

In a process he described as "orderly" and in numbers he regarded as "normal," Williamson said that about 2,500 taxpayers have called to schedule informal appeals of their 1993 tax revaluation. He expects a total of 3,000 or more to meet with appraisers to discuss their revised values.

Anyone who feels their property has been improperly valued can schedule a meeting with an appraiser who will show the owner the evaluation forms, maps and local real estate data used to establish the property's fair market value. State law requires the county to base its land valuations on 100 percent of fair market value.

With about a third of the informal appeals complete, Williamson said "only a handful" have been dissatisfied with the results and requested a hearing before the county Board of Equalization and Review. Fewer board hearings are being requested this year, "probably because the increase (in valuations) was not as great as it was eight years ago," Williamson said.

"We're still making appointments for informal hearings, but it has slowed down quite a bit," Williamson said. "Anyone who has questions about their revaluation should try to make an appointment within the next couple weeks so we can close out this phase and move on to formal hearings with the board of equalization and review."

Anyone who has a question about their new tax appraisal or who wants to schedule an informal hearing with an appraiser should call the revaluation office at (910) 253-7616. The hearings are held at the county tax office and take about 20 minutes.

County Report Card Shows Local Students Still Lag

Here are some specific 1993 Report Card findings for Brunswick County:

■ Compared to 33.9 percent locally, about 39.6 percent of high school students tested statewide scored at proficiency level (the equivalent of As and Bs on the multiple-choice sections) on core course tests in 1993. Core courses are taken by most students and are required to graduate: algebra 1, biology, economic/legal/political systems and U.S. history.

■ Countywide, 38.3 percent of all 1993 graduates (down from 45 percent in 1992) met the course requirements for admission to a member campus of the University of North Carolina system: four units of English, U.S. History and one other social studies; a biological science, a physical science and one lab course; three math, including algebra 1 and 2 and geometry, or higher.

■ Within the cluster, New Bern-Craven Schools reported the highest percentage of students attaining proficient levels on core course tests, 45.6 percent, a difference of 11.7 points.

■ The achievement gap between local high school students and their peers statewide was evident in advanced elective indicators in math (combined data for geometry and algebra 2) and science (chemistry and physics). While participation rates were similar, a much smaller percentage of local students taking those courses scored at or above proficient level. Participation rate was based on the number of students (based on eighth grade enrollment) who would have been eligible to take the electives.

■ In math the participation rate was 52.7 percent state, 50.1 percent county. Statewide 40.4 percent of those tested scored proficient, compared to 29.8 percent locally. In science, participation was 27.3 percent state, 26.2 percent county. Statewide 43.4 percent were rated proficient, compared to 28.9 percent here.

■ The average combined SAT score for Brunswick County students tested rose to 806, the highest in five years, up from 781 last year. The state average is 834, down from 855 last year. There was no indication of the number of students tested each year.

■ Student attendance improved, rising from 94 percent in 1992 to 95.11 percent in 1993. The statewide standard is 94.72 percent.

■ The county's already good dropout rate continues to improve, falling from 1.82 percent to 1.75 percent. The state standards is 2.79 percent.

■ On the multiple-choice section of the end-of-grade reading tests for grades 3-8, 60.9 percent of local students taking the test scored at or above grade level, compared to 62.6 percent statewide. Within the cluster, Randolph County ranked highest, with 66.3 percent.

Schools Get Report Card

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said, "but are not where we want to be. It's not acceptable."

However, the schools maintained the standards required for state accreditation through 1995.

The report card provides indicators for the state as a whole and Brunswick County, and also ranks the local school system within its "school district cluster." These are schools across the state that are very similar in community characteristics, such as educational level, income and poverty levels, single-parent families, and parental employment, including mothers in the labor force, based on 1990 U.S. Census data.

"That's a better comparison (than with neighboring school systems)

because our community characteristics are a lot more similar. That is fair because supposedly the only variable that's different is the educational experience."

In comparison with those systems, Calhoun said, "I don't think we're very good. There's a big discrepancy between our indicators and those of the top systems within our cluster."

"That's an indication we have some work to do," he admitted frankly. "We have to get better."

Brunswick County is clustered with Cumberland, Franklin, Granville, Pender, Person, Randolph, Rockingham and Wilson county schools and Elizabeth City/Pasquotank, Franklinton City and New Bern-Craven schools.

Hospital Ruling Handed Down

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process for a management company. The hospital authority entered into a 10-year lease agreement on May 17, 1984, with the intent that the lease would be converted to 40 years if a law limiting leases to 10 years expired.

Unresolved since 1984 had been the question of whether the lease had been automatically extended.

As the "old" hospital legislation expired on June 30, 1984, a bill was introduced to replace it effective July 1. However, Sen. R.C. Soles Jr. of Tabor City attempted to have Brunswick County exempted from the new law.

The county wasn't exempted, but the maneuvering meant the new law's passage was delayed until July 2, leaving a gap in which there was no legislation governing the leasing of a public hospital to a for-profit company.

A declaratory judgment, such as the one sought by HealthTrust Inc. and its subsidiary, Hospital Corporation of North Carolina, which actually holds the lease, stipulates the rights of the parties.

It has the same force as a final judgment or decree, but is different in that it does not seek execution or performance from anyone.

Landfill Site Proposed Near River Alarms Neighbors, Fishermen

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Leland, another committee member. "I don't know where, not yet...I'm not anywhere near ready to vote tonight."

At Tuesday's meeting, Harrelson tried to quell some fears that the new landfill might leak.

He said there's a "very remote possibility" that groundwater or surface waters would become contaminated. "It's going to be contained. I think the rules are very explicit on that."

Consultant Tom Austin said state and federal regulations require that new landfills be lined with a material similar to bed liners on pickup trucks to prevent leaching.

Two feet of compacted clay and one foot of gravel must be placed on top of the liner. Also, rules require a vertical separation of at least eight feet between the groundwater and garbage.

"The EPA says this design will provide reasonable protection for groundwater," Austin said.

But some residents said they were not convinced.

"There's no assurance that you're going to keep that pollution in the landfill and out of our dear, dear river," said Wallace Smith, a member of Save Our Shellfish.

Smith said the fishermen's organization has been working for more than five years to clean up pollution in the Lockwood Folly.

"We've had a few gains and a few setbacks, primarily due to government," Smith said. "We are supposed to leave the land in better

shape than we found it for our children and others that follow us."

Carson Price of Supply asked what would happen if there was a hurricane and unusually high groundwater levels. "You cannot guard against an act of God," he said.

Also speaking at Tuesday's meeting was William Burney, who represented approximately 25 people from the Royal Oak community who turned out to oppose the landfill sites.

Varnamtown's mayor pro tem, Ennis Swain, told the committee that the town board opposes the five sites in the Bolivia/Supply area.

He said all five border tributaries of the Lockwood Folly River, which flows past Varnamtown. "We're not going to stand idly by and allow you to pollute more," he said.

While no action was taken this week, the county can't afford to wait too long before choosing a site. County Engineer Robert Tucker said a new landfill must be operational by Jan. 1, 1998.

"Four years away is not a lot of time when you're dealing with a sensitive issue like a new landfill site," Tucker said.

Besides building a new landfill, Tucker said officials are looking into other waste management alternatives such as using New Hanover County's incinerator or a proposed regional incinerator in Columbus County.

Even if those options are approved, however, Tucker said the county will still need a new landfill as a backup.

Icy Fingers Of Arctic Mass May Reach Area By Weekend

Temperatures are expected to dip below normal over the next few days, and by the weekend could drop to some of the coldest temperatures the area has felt in at least 10 years.

Shallotte Point meteorologist Jackson Canady said the area could be affected by a serious outbreak of arctic air by the end of the week. "If so, we could get some of the coldest weather we've had in a long time," he said. But Jackson said Tuesday it was still too early to predict the southward movement of the mass or how cold temperatures might drop.

The short-term forecast calls for

temperatures to average around 30 degrees at night to about 50 degrees during the daytime, with approximately one-half inch of precipitation.

For the period of Jan. 4-10, a high of 65 degrees was recorded Jan. 7 and a low of 23 degrees was recorded on Jan. 10.

A daily average high of 55 degrees combined with a nightly average low of 35 degrees for a daily average temperature of 45 degrees, which is about normal, said Canady.

He recorded two-tenths of an inch of rainfall.

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