



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

John J. Bonacic

## Senate Passes Two Fixes for Sullivan West

JOHN J. BONACIC June 20, 2012

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### Outgoing School Superintendent Ken Hilton Credited With pushing Legislative Changes

In an article in the *Sullivan County Democrat* which appeared April 10, 2012, Sullivan West School District Superintendent Ken Hilton confirmed he was retiring but, that he was “looking forward to serving that community with enthusiasm and commitment through June 30, 2012.” State Senator John Bonacic today reported that Hilton certainly has done that when it comes to fixing legislative problems associated with the District, which was formed as a result of a three way merger.

In December, Hilton contacted Bonacic about the need for two legislative fixes associated with the District, neither problem of which originated from Hilton’s making.

**CHANGE NUMBER ONE (Senate Bill 6110):** The first was the need to fix a legislative change enacted by the State in 2011, as part of a solution to bigger problem. In a paragraph of a 130 page budget bill, the State last year sought to fix the problem of School Districts which make building improvements, only to sell the buildings at a windfall profit. That 2011 change, however, had an unforeseen negative impact on Sullivan West. Under the law prior to 2011, Districts kept the windfall, even if the State paid a large portion of the overall building costs through state building aid.

However, in Sullivan West’s case, Mr. Hilton reported, the District still owes \$35 million on two buildings, which combined, the District thought may end up selling for only \$3 million, but which were still unnecessary as a result of the consolidation of the three districts. Superintendent Hilton asked Bonacic and Assemblywoman Aileen Gunther for a special State Law for Districts, like his, which consolidated. Under Superintendent Hilton’s proposal, since there was no windfall in the case of Sullivan West, the old rules would still apply – saving Sullivan West an estimated \$170,000 per year in bond payments.

**CHANGE NUMBER TWO (Senate Bill 7218-A):** The second change was a simpler one. Many schools are involved in pre-kindergarten programs – with many pre-k programs held outside of school buildings. State law prohibits schools from picking up pre-k students anyplace - even to go to the very same school buildings where the child’s older sibling is going, unless the District will also deliver to private pre-k placement facilities. The prohibition was meant to not create favoritism of one pre-k program over another.

In Sullivan West, that meant fifteen pre-k students, in an otherwise publicly financed pre-k program, would have to find their own way to school, even while older siblings could ride the bus - even though pre-k programs outside of the school itself are far between in Sullivan West’s territory.

Bonacic said Hilton always made himself available to discuss the legislation, review changes requested by the Assembly, and answer technical questions about the building aid reimbursement.

“Mr. Hilton acted as the ideal public servant. He recognized problems not of his own making and found solutions in a professional way. He didn’t complain or attack; he understood why the law made sense for most places, but worked to have it better accommodate his District. Some Superintendents – even those who received huge increases in State aid over the past decade just complain without offering any constructive ideas other than demanding more money. Others take the time to identify the problem and find a reasonable solution. Mr. Hilton’s professionalism is a credit to educators,” Bonacic said. Both of Hilton’s proposals, S.6110 and S.7218A have passed the State Senate. One (S.7218A) has also now passed the Assembly. “We encourage the Assembly to pass both these bills, and I believe they will,” concluded Senator Bonacic.

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