

720 Words

Personal Thoughts on the Special-Tax District by Rauf Bolden *

“Political suicide,” I thought, dreading another school-tax referendum.

Asked to create a special-tax district, assessing ourselves three mils on property, being the opportunity to participate in some kind of condominium ownership of a new high school in Gulf Shores.

Wondering how our elected officials will politely disavow themselves from this Education Initiative, knowing there is little or no taste to re-visit school taxes on the street, especially after two consecutive defeats at the polls that closely resembled razor-strap whippings, bitterly dividing Orange Beach.

The presenter said, “It will be different this time.”

I understand the need for better schools in our area, teaching in portable trailers, working in classrooms with material shortages, overcrowding turning educators into disciplinarians.

The greater good can only be served by building a strong society of educated citizens, giving children the gift of letters, having them read and write well, passing on these skills to the next generation.

For additional taxes my feeling of disappointment dominates, seeing the serpent rear its ugly head again is riveting. A tax hike, like that childhood dish you always hated is back on the table again, perhaps the premise of the argument is different this time, but the taste for new-school taxes sours in the mouth like bad milk.

Some argue the Baldwin County Board of Education will assess three mils eventually, dividing it by seven, distributing the proceeds amongst seven districts in the county, acting now keeps the entire three mils on the island.

Some argue the Baldwin County Board of Education has no money, needing a solution, like the tax district, leaving 3 mils of self-funding here, freeing up resources for North Baldwin.

Some argue the Special-Tax District will be governed by a Cooperative Agreement with a governing body, expecting us to accept three out of nine votes on the Board and put up 47% of the money, whereas Gulf Shores puts up 33% of the money for a 3/9 vote, presenting fiscal inequalities that do not make sense, questioning a governance make-up that is skewed, needing guaranteed liberty to make our own decisions without School-Board interference, a document with teeth that nails down these disparities is required, possibly negotiating something worthy of Council signatures.

I argue the interests of Orange Beach are not being put first, being treated like the little brother, patted on the head and told to sign-on the dotted line, indebting ourselves for a \$60 Million High School over 30 years, seemingly getting muscled around. The thought of indebtedness and the fact that our property is in another jurisdiction with no brick-and-mortar structure of our own like a Middle School, reflecting that investment, perhaps a bad partnership for Orange Beach and a great one for Gulf Shores, hearing not one objection.

When you think about it, a special-tax district leaves room to grow, eventually evicting the Baldwin County Board of Education, showing them the door, creating our own School District and Education Authority, being a novel idea worthy of another five-dollar latte.

I asked a local boy of fourteen to write an essay about his favorite meal, volunteering to pay him for his work, as we publish a literary magazine. Punctuated by errors, the page was unpublishable, like he had been playing hooky down on the bayou his entire life.

He said, "I ran it through the spell checker," not knowing the difference between there and their.

Yet this school system is solid enough to send children to the Ivy League and graduates to Alabama, Auburn and Troy. Should the school system be blamed for no-time-spent-with-the children parenting?

I digress. So what is three mils? It is the thin end of an ever-increasing wedge, looking at other cities, sustaining their own school systems where 65 mils are not enough, realizing the good people who live here would eventually have to leave, because fixed-income residents cannot pay the higher levies, funding schools could be enhanced with better management of the monies they already have or lobby for lottery funding for Pre-K through 12, doing so may give a child a better life.

*Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any agency or department of the City of Orange Beach, Alabama government.