

N. Hartford schools chief expands role in community

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NEW HARTFORD — New Hartford school district Superintendent Daniel Gilligan is spending significant time and effort involved in town issues not directly related to the education of students, from promoting the New Hartford Business Park to drumming up funds to buy a 22-acre potential park near Perry Junior High School.

Gilligan, who made \$157,000 in the 2007-08 school year and will retire in October, says his evolving role in local economic-development projects is a necessary one, given the demands of finding tax revenue to fund a healthy school district for the area's children.

"The idea of the superintendent focusing internally on the school rather than externally on the community, that is by and large a thing of the past in most districts I'm aware of," Gilligan said.

But Gilligan's approach has critics as well.

"I'd prefer that school people concentrate on educating and running a school system," said George Casale Jr., a former school board member in the Mohawk Central School District who has three children attending New Hartford schools.

"That's what we're paying for."

New Hartford officials mostly support Gilligan's increased role — but some also mentioned the possible pitfalls of mixing schools and politics.

"I see (Gilligan's role) as emerging and important, and I very definitely think you'll see more of it in the near future," said Phil Eastman, former pupil personnel services director for the school district and a former New Hartford school board president.

Eastman added, "But you have to be careful you don't get trapped into something other than your main position, which is to educate the young people of this community."

A series of projects

Gilligan took over as superintendent in June 2005 after 20 years as the district's assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction. After he steps down next month, Gilligan will be replaced by Robert Nole, who has served as the district's superintendent for business affairs since 2003.

Among the broader projects Gilligan has pursued are:

- Promoting the \$25.7 million Triple A capital project, which was approved by voters in March 2007.
- Putting together the Community Investment Initiative Group, which includes officials from the town and villages of New Hartford and New York Mills and the two school districts in those municipalities.
- Becoming an outspoken advocate for the New Hartford Business Park and recently the controversial proposed intersection at Route 840 and Woods Highway. A recent memorandum from Gilligan to the O-D about the project was written on school district letterhead.
- Accepting a 17-acre land gift off Middle Settlement Road from Lawrence Adler, the developer of the New Hartford Business Park, for the future development of a regional shared school bus facility.
- Leading the drive to find private funding to purchase the 22-acre piece of property near Perry Junior High School, which Gilligan hopes to name Higby Park and make a series of athletic fields for children.

Gilligan has local support

The New Hartford school board president, Planning Board chairman and town supervisor all support Gilligan's activities.

James Davis, president and spokesman for the district school board, said a superintendent's role in the community is dependent to an extent on his personality.

BUSY SCHEDULE

A list of activities Daniel Gilligan is involved in:

- The \$25.7 million Triple A capital project.
- Organizing the Community Investment Initiative Group.
- The New Hartford Business Park and recently the controversial proposed intersection at Route 840 and Woods Highway at the site.
- The 17-acre proposed shared school bus facility.
- The proposed 22-acre piece of property near Perry Junior High School.

BY THE NUMBERS

New Hartford school district has improved its tax on true rankings in relation to other area school districts recently. Tax on true is the amount of property taxes paid per thousand dollars of full property value. Lower rankings correspond with lower taxes.

A survey by the Oneida-Herkimer-Madison BOCES of 12 area school districts found New Hartford was 11th out of those 12 in 2002-03. By 2006-07, it had improved to 8th.

New Hartford

2002-2003 rate: \$23.48 (11th)
2006-2007 rate: \$21.67 (8th)

Brookfield

2002-2003 rate: \$17.17 (1st)
2006-2007 rate: \$15.26 (1st)

Sauquoit

2002-2003 rate: \$18.07 (2nd)
2006-2007 rate: \$20.24 (6th)

Utica

2002-2003 rate: \$18.93 (3rd)
2006-2007 rate: \$24.28 (10th)

Holland Patent

2002-2003 rate: \$19.46 (4th)
2006-2007 rate: \$19.88 (4th)

Waterville

"(Some) can take a more understated role focusing on the ins and outs of the district, and in the larger scheme of things, I think that's what Dan has done his whole career," Davis said.

"He's had a great deal of experience and now as superintendent, he's seen how he can take that role and apply it to the bigger picture."

Davis echoed Gilligan's sentiment that pushing for economic prosperity is an indirect way to ensure a good school experience for children.

Hans Arnold, chairman of the town's Planning Board, has been critical of the intersection plan at Route 840. But overall, Gilligan's involvement is a "net positive."

"There is an integral relationship to the schools and the (local economy)," Arnold said. "I think he sees the relationship and having him involved is a tremendous benefit to the economy."

Town Supervisor Earle Reed agreed: "When you get into economic development, you can get into some controversial areas. But Dan's heart is in the right place. He really wants more young people to get back into the area."

Oneida-Herkimer-Madison BOCES Superintendent Howard Mettleman called Gilligan a "true community leader" whose actions demonstrate his commitment to students.

Shifting role

An expert in the field said Gilligan's role is "very progressive" and part of a new wave of active superintendents.

"The superintendent's role is beginning to evolve," said Dr. Stephen Jacobson, a professor of educational administration and associate dean of the Graduate School of Education at the University at Buffalo. "It's not a stagnant role."

In addition, a superintendent's awareness of local economic issues helps with planning budgets, Jacobson said.

Davis said the paradigm for a superintendent has shifted and that schools, as a level of government, have a vested interest in economic development.

"The bottom line is education and children and the perpetuation of a school district," he said.

Economy matters

Gilligan says statistics back his point. The district's tax on true rate — the amount of property taxes paid per thousand dollars of full property value — has improved in recent years in relationship with other area school districts. That has happened, despite declining enrollment, because of the commercial growth in New Hartford.

A tax on true survey done by Oneida-Herkimer-Madison BOCES shows New Hartford slowly improving in relation to other school districts. New Hartford had the 11th highest rate (\$23.48 per thousand dollars of a property's full value) out of the 12 schools in 2002-03. In 2006-07, it was eighth out of 12 schools with a rate of \$21.67 per thousand dollars of a property's full value.

'A good people person'

Eastman, the former school board president, said the superintendent must be careful with his involvement.

"The only pitfall I can see would be politics," he said. "The individual has to keep himself clear of politics as a school leader."

Casale described a "fine line" between economic projects and politics.

"No politics should be in the school," he said. "They should be focused on educating kids to keep them safe."

The role of advocate is isn't surprising for Gilligan, Eastman said.

"It's a natural for Dan because he's such a good people person," he said.

Gilligan called himself "very mission-oriented."

2002-2003 rate: \$20.23 (5th)

2006-2007 rate: \$18.19 (2nd)

Remsen

2002-2003 rate: \$20.73 (6th)

2006-2007 rate: \$20.55 (7th)

Whitesboro

2002-2003 rate: \$21.73 (7th)

2006-2007 rate: \$19.15 (3rd)

Oriskany

2002-2003 rate: \$22.37 (8th)

2006-2007 rate: \$25.14 (11th)

New York Mills

2002-2003 rate: \$22.87 (9th)

2006-2007 rate: \$20.23 (5th)

Clinton

2002-2003 rate: \$23.17 (10th)

2006-2007 rate: \$21.99 (9th)

Westmoreland

2002-2003 rate: \$28.40 (12th)

2006-2007 rate: \$26.73 (12th)

Because he's watched enrollment decline over the years, part of his mission has become to keep children in the area with jobs.

"One of the roles you see me playing is one of economic developer," he said. "But I'm really not much of that. I'm just a realist that says we're trying to work together as a team to make a good thing happen.

"For me it's all about one thing: The kids."

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