

School consolidation bill shut down in committee

■ About 300 show up to protest the governor's policy.

BY RICK M. GREEN
The Oklahoman

OKLAHOMA CITY — An initial attempt at school district consolidation, one of Gov. Mary Fallin's priorities, landed with a thud Monday as hundreds of parents, teachers and children swarmed the Capitol to criticize the effort.

A bill by Rep. Lee Denney, R-Cushing, was trounced in a packed House committee room, with three members in favor and eight against.

Oklahoma has more than 500 school districts. Some state leaders have suggested consolidation as a way of reducing administrative ex-

penses and bringing more resources to the classrooms.

Denney's bill would have consolidated some underperforming dependent school districts. These districts educate students through elementary or middle school and then transfer them to nearby districts.

Under the bill, a dependent school district that gets a D or F in Oklahoma's A-F school grading system would be consolidated into the independent district that receives their students for high school. About three dozen school districts, mostly in rural areas, could have been affected by the legislation.

Denney said she regarded the legislation as a "conversation starter" and was disappointed that it did not advance to the full House.

"But I understand the ve-



Opponents of school district consolidation cheer a decision in their favor Monday as they attend a hearing at the state Capitol in Oklahoma City.

PAUL HELLSTERN/The Oklahoman

racity of people not wanting their schools to change," she said. "Everyone likes their own local school, including myself when my kids were

in school."

She said she got hundreds of emails over the weekend from people concerned about the bill. About 300

Watch a video

Hear World Staff Writer Randy Krehbiel and Managing Editor Mike Strain discuss issues at the Oklahoma Capitol on Monday.

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took advantage of the Presidents Day holiday to go to the Capitol to lobby against the measure.

Cheryl Garrison, superintendent of Darlington School in El Reno, said Oklahoma's A-F grading system is flawed and shouldn't be used as a yardstick for school district consolidation. Her district has a C grade.

She said nearly 90 percent of the district's students are American Indian.

"A lot of my students are there at my school district because of choice," she said.

"We embrace the culture. They get to keep their identity. We do a lot of things to nurture them. We are there for their families.

"Our teachers stay after school every day until 4:30, an extra hour, to tutor students. We also have a Boys & Girls Club after school that goes to 5:30 or 6."

Quinton Roman Nose, whose grandchildren attend Darlington, said they get individual attention that they wouldn't see in a larger district.

"They're not going to get the same quality and attention at the bigger schools," he said.

Denney said that although her House Bill 2824 failed to clear committee, several other school consolidation measures are still in play.

rmgreen@oklahoman.com



Fab Lab Tulsa education manager Brandi Dixon watches as McLain Junior High School student Michael Walling, 14, screen-prints a T-shirt on Monday. JAMES GIBBARD/Tulsa World

SHIRTS

FROM A7

that comes with doing things that are hands-on," Kirk said. "... It teaches (students) a skill that they can take with them."

Like Estrada, McLain student Mathew Nelson, 14, was happy to spend his day off on the field trip.

"I love doing things with science," he said. "You've got to have science."

The Rogers students previously participated in a STEM underwater robotics competition. For their next project,

the group will be designing and building a chair, Bias said.

Gonzalez, 14, said he's enjoyed STEM Club so far.

"I like to work on things and build things," he said.

Estrada agreed.

"I like to get my hands dirty," she said.

Her dream, she added, is to be an auto mechanic when she grows up.

Estrada has enjoyed the teamwork aspect of STEM Club.

"You get lots of support and encouragement," she said. "If you get stuck, there's always someone you can turn to."

The five-year, \$3 million

AEP grant program, announced in 2015, is starting this year at Rogers and will eventually expand to a total of four Tulsa Public Schools high schools and their feeder middle schools.

The program works with students to prepare them to take college-level STEM classes and allows them to earn college credit while in high school.

Bias said her position as STEM supervisor is funded through the AEP grant, which is administered through Tulsa Community College.

In addition to the outside activities and competitions,

Bias said, she "works with administrators and teachers to find where I can inject STEM experiences into the curriculum."

Participating in hands-on activities while working in a team environment has other benefits, she added.

Bias said she has witnessed Gonzalez's confidence grow immeasurably from having his T-shirt design selected.

"It's exciting the opportunities that these kids have," she said. "If it wasn't for the grant, this wouldn't be possible."

Tim Stanley 918-581-8385
tim.stanley@tulsaworld.com

REPORT

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workers who visited this family, particularly the mother, found they were struggling with poverty, the mother had a physical disability and they were raising a child with very severe disabilities," Powell said. "The medical professionals throughout DHS involvement said these disabilities would be difficult for any family."

Two months before Camaron's death, DHS workers visited the family on an allegation they were living with a relative who smoked, which would compromise their son's health. They found the family had been keeping the medical appointments for Camaron and had plans to move within the month.

"They were not living in the conditions where the child later died," Powell said. "Our workers saw them in a completely different environment. After our workers saw them, their circumstances obviously changed."

The charges filed against the McKays state the couple failed to treat the child's medical condition and did not take care of their home, which did not have electricity and had several piles of trash and dog feces. Charges also state the couple did not meet Camaron's needs by failing to attend doctor appointments, provide medical services, give prescribed medication and maintain medical equipment.

On Nov. 24, 2014, Sarah McKay called 911 reporting

Prior DHS interventions

Nov. 4, 2003: A call made alleging inadequate nutrition of Camaron Larson. Tulsa County DHS recommended supportive services including the continuation of Sooner Start.

May 29, 2004: An emergency room called saying Sarah McKay brought in 15-month-old Camaron with feeding tube problems, but she left before receiving treatment. Tulsa County workers found she took the child to another medical facility to have the tube reinserted. No services were recommended.

Sept. 23, 2004: Mayes County DHS investigated a report Sarah McKay was not following through with medical recommendations for Camaron, who needed to take a medication three times a day to prevent self-mutilation. She allegedly could not wake up for the 8 a.m. dosage. McKay signed a voluntary service agreement with DHS to allow access to Sooner Start providers, to find a local pediatrician and to provide a recent physical exam for Camaron.

Feb. 14, 2005: Tulsa County DHS investigated a complaint Camaron had a respiratory infection and 3-inch diameter pressure sore on his back. He was hospitalized four days later for an antibiotic treatment for the sore. DHS recommended services, but McKay refused because she was receiving Sooner Start services.

April 15, 2005: Creek County

DHS received a report that 2-year-old Camaron arrived at the emergency room for a chemical irritation to his face. McKay said her other son, about a year older, had crawled into the crib and sprayed the toddler with a bleach spray. DHS recommended supportive services and documented some services were in place.

May 27, 2005: Tulsa County DHS received a call that three or four children younger than age 3 were living in an apartment running around unsupervised at all times, including as late as 1 a.m. DHS found the family had in-home providers, and Sooner Start was providing physical therapy for Camaron.

Feb. 1, 2006: Tulsa County DHS received a report Camaron was taken to the emergency room by ambulance allegedly unresponsive. Medical officials told the caseworker that Camaron's death was expected due to his medical condition, and there was no indication of abuse.

May 21, 2008: Tulsa County DHS received a report Camaron's health declined in behavior, hygiene and physical appearance. Medical officials told caseworkers no neglect was suspected. DHS recommended services, which included continuation of in-home therapy.

Dec. 1, 2012: Tulsa County DHS investigated a report alleging the parents were abusing illegal drugs and leaving Camaron in bed for two to three days, urinating and defecating on

himself. DHS did not substantiate the allegation but recommended the medical services for Camaron continue.

Nov. 20, 2013: Tulsa County DHS notified when Robert McKay arrived at the emergency room with his stepson, Camaron, who was in respiratory distress and covered in dirt. McKay allegedly stated that Camaron had been staying with a family member who smoked the past week and not given Camaron breathing treatment. Sarah McKay told workers she informed the family member about Camaron's asthma and medical needs. She said they went directly to the emergency room when realizing Camaron was having trouble breathing. DHS did not substantiate the allegation.

Sept. 12, 2014: Tulsa County DHS received an allegation the family had moved in with a family member who smoked, and Camaron's needs were not being met. Workers found the family planned to move within the month and had been attending medical appointments for Camaron. The allegation was not to be unsubstantiated.

Nov. 14, 2014: Camaron, age 11, was pronounced dead at the family's home after Sarah McKay called 911. Police found the home without power, and the child wearing a T-shirt and diaper in a bedroom with a temperature of 62 degrees.

Source: Office of Juvenile System Oversight and court records

Camaron was "not breathing" and that her "son is frozen," a police affidavit states.

He was pronounced dead a few minutes later by emergency personnel who arrived

at the family's residence in the 1000 block of North Florence Avenue.

RIVER

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drier periods.

The Zink Dam rebuild and new pedestrian bridge are slated to cost about \$63 million.

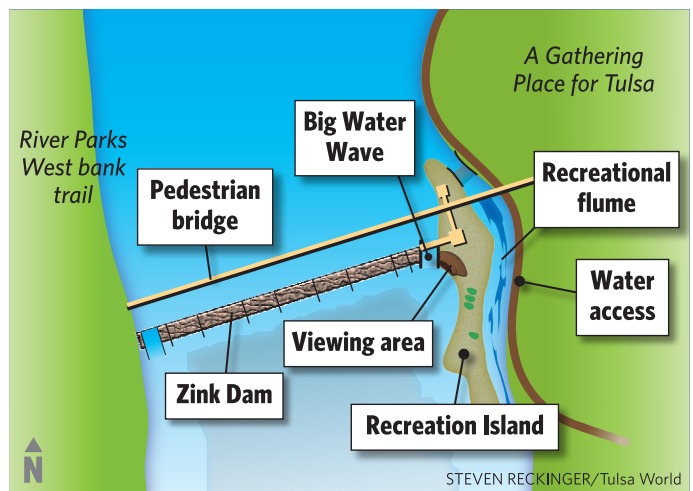
Zink Dam, built in the early 1980s, is malfunctioning due to a lack of maintenance. It would be rebuilt from its foundation up.

The plan includes public access points and built-in water features, including a recreational flume and island to run alongside A Gathering Place for Tulsa, a huge park that is being built on Riverside Drive from 24th Street to 33rd Place.

The designs for both dams call for a system of steel vertical gates on hinges — called Obermeyer gates — that rise when a large rubber bladder at their base is inflated.

The hinges would connect the steel gates to the foundations of the dams, forming walls when the downstream bladders fill and lowering the gates' profiles when the bladders deflate.

An engineering group that researched the gates said rais-



Map shows the proposed rebuilt Zink Dam and pedestrian bridge, and nearby facilities.

ing and lowering them could help with fish migration and silt buildup.

The south Tulsa/Jenks dam would be built just south of the Creek Turnpike, near 101st Street. That project also would include a pedestrian bridge, plus a boat dock and connection to trails along the river — all for about \$64.2 million.

Parks, Turkey Mountain

A substantial portion of

the river infrastructure plan actually would go toward parks, trails and the Turkey Mountain Urban Wilderness Area.

About \$7.6 million is set aside to purchase Turkey Mountain land that had been targeted for an outlet mall before public outcry derailed that plan.

If the Vision extension is approved, that land would be purchased by the River Parks Authority to add about 50

Vision tax

The 0.6 percent Vision 2025 tax is set to expire next year. A proposal to renew the tax in Tulsa is coming to voters April 5. It has three major components:

- Almost a third of the tax, or \$272 million during the first 15 years, is set aside as a permanent tax for public safety. The public safety portion would provide for about 160 new police officers, 70 new firefighters, and 16 additional 911 personnel and street maintenance workers, among other additions.

acres to the Turkey Mountain Urban Wilderness Area.

The cost to buy the land is about \$6 million, leaving about \$1.6 million for amenities including trail rehabilitation and facilities.

Late last year, Bynum shifted the proposed Vision river infrastructure plan from focusing on low-water dams to a corridor-wide plan, saying he realized that protecting parks and providing access

Levee rehabilitation and other maintenance funds

The Vision plan includes \$5 million in funds to be matched by other government entities, including Tulsa County, for Levee District 12 rehabilitation. The plan would fund some of the needs for the aging levee system to protect Tulsa from floods, detailed last year in a Tulsa World investigation.

Another major component of the overall infrastructure project recommended by the task force is a long-term operations and maintenance endowment to maintain the new low-water dams.

That money, about \$24 million, was pulled out of the Vision funding, but officials hope it will be picked up by funding partners.

Bynum said the low-water dams would not be built without the maintenance endowment, which is necessary to avoid future issues similar to the current state of Zink Dam.

Ginnie Graham 918-581-8376
ginnie.graham@tulsaworld.com

Arianna Pickard 918-581-8413
arianna.pickard@tulsaworld.com

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Jarrel Wade 918-581-8367
jarrel.wade@tulsaworld.com