What the wind farm told Tripp Delmont does not match how things turned out

Jennifer Fischer
TRIPP — The potential loss of a school in Tripp could have an even larger widespread impact on the community, according to city officials.

In the last three school years, Tripp-Delmont's enrollment has decreased rapidly from 191 students in the fall of 2013 to 158 in the fall of 2015.

"We've got a lot of issues that are against us right now, and open enrollment has done nothing good for us as far as I'm concerned," Tripp Mayor Victor Olson said. "My twist on this is, other small communities better see what's going on here, because they're next."

According to information gathered by the South Dakota Department of Education, 49 students open enrolled out of the Tripp-Delmont district in fall 2015, and by the end of the school year, that number had increased to 57.

Sixteen students open enrolled to the Armour district; two to Avon; one to Bon Homme; three to Chester Area; four to Menno; two to Mitchell; 26 to Parkston; one to Scotland; and two to Wessington Springs. No students open enrolled into the Tripp-Delmont district.

Now, the district is in the process of reorganizing in the form of an opt out, consolidation or formally dissolving, according to Superintendent Gail Swenson.

School officials have begun discussions with the Avon, Menno, Armour, Parkston and Scotland school districts about a possible consolidation.

'When sports override academics'
Olson believes the majority of students who open enroll out of Tripp-Delmont do so in search of better athletic opportunities, not because of a lackluster education. The experience of being involved in quality athletics are important in South Dakota, Olson said, and Tripp-Delmont, which co-ops with Armour for athletics, has recent a history of teams with losing records.

In 2015-2016, the Tripp-Delmont/Armour football team ended its season 1-7, volleyball at 7-18, girls basketball 11-11 and boys basketball 1-20.

"You want to make the best of every experience in high school and if I'm on a team that can barely drag up enough guys to make up a team, first of all, and it's definitely not going to be a winning team, I'm going to send my kid somewhere else—a bigger school that can win a trophy at the end of the year," Olson said. "But when sports override academics, as a parent, I'd have a tough time with that."

Ultimately, though, Olson believes the root of the district's problem comes down to a lack in funding for the school and the absence of state assistance.

Superintendent Gail Swenson has said she hoped Tripp-Delmont would receive more state funding following the half-cent sales tax increase to bolster South Dakota teacher salaries, but the district received one of the lowest totals of new money in the state at $14,690—because of the district's falling enrollment and low student-teacher ratio.

The new formula bases school funding on a target student-to-teacher ratio. In schools with more than 600 students, the target ratio is one teacher for every 15 students, whereas in a district of less than 200 students — like Tripp-Delmont — the ratio is one teacher per 12 students. For the 2016-2017 school year, the student-teacher ratio at Tripp-Delmont is about six-to-one.

**Economic impacts**

Olson said the district, as well as the entire Tripp area, was under the impression the building of the Beethoven Wind Farm in 2015 would generate funds to go directly to the Tripp-Delmont district and other local entities.
The Beethoven Wind Farm has 43 General Electric wind turbines and is located at the confluence of Bon Homme, Charles Mix and Hutchinson County, near Tripp Lake, about 6 miles west of Tripp.

Since the passing of Senate Bill 131, the royalties from this project and others like it, go to a sort of general fund to be distributed among all school districts in the state, Olson said.

"It's also the fact that we were basically told that outside funding sources would come into our school directly and they don't—and I'm pointing at the wind towers," Olson said.

If the district were to close its doors or consolidate with another district, the potential lack of a school building in the town of Tripp could be "extremely detrimental" to the town's economy, Olson said.

"It's a shot in the heart to our community," Olson said. "Economics-wise, the teachers get a paycheck from the school system, but they also spend their paycheck in Tripp. It's a give and take scenario where we pay them, but they pay back to our community by shopping in our stores."

With the loss of the school, the Tripp community would be one step closer to becoming a "bedroom community," according to Olson, meaning people would live in Tripp but travel to places like Yankton and Mitchell for work, leisure and shopping.

No matter what the school board decides—whether it be to consolidate, accept an opt out or dissolve—Olson said he does not envy the board members and the "impossibly difficult discussion" they are facing. It's impossible to please everybody, no matter what conclusion is reached, he said.

"I believe we have a very competent school board and I have confidence in them that they're going to pursue the best decision for the community and the kids, whatever that is," Olson said. "That is a very, very tough job that I wouldn't want, so I want to applaud the board for taking on that responsibility."