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Auburnians ask reps for help in Albany

Kelly Voll / The Citizen Mar 28, 2012

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Sen. Michael Nozzolio answers Auburn students' questions regarding equitable distribution of state

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funding to their schools at the state Capitol in Albany on Tuesday.

Michelle Bixby / The Citizen

ALBANY — More than 50 Auburnians went on a pilgrimage Tuesday to ask for help from state representatives for Auburn's schools.

The trek was long; two yellow school buses, which were paid for by school board member Jason Lesch and Majorpalooza, a local charity, picked up 35 students and 20 concerned residents at 6:30 a.m. at Auburn High School. The group's first meeting with Sens. Michael Nozzolio, David Valesky and John DeFrancisco and Assemblyman Gary Finch was at 10:30 a.m.

The group was on the move, attending meetings with politicians, dropping in on senators and asking tough questions about Auburn's state aid, until 2:30 p.m. when student-lobbyists and other school district stakeholders climbed back aboard the buses to head home.

“I think we got Auburn's name out there to remind them of Auburn's unique issues,” said Kathleen Carnes, an Auburn parent and one of the bus trip's organizers. “I felt the legislators were hearing us and providing answers to our questions, and I think it was just really good, our presence being there.”

The Auburn pilgrims traveled to the state Capitol to speak to state representatives about what they say is inequitable state aid to Auburn schools, rigid and unfunded mandates and a potential “average-need district” designation that might be causing Auburn to be the victim of disproportionately large cuts in state aid.

“We are a high-need district, but when the governor made his cuts a few years ago, they treated us as an average-need district,” said Lesch, who also helped plan the trip. “We got hit disproportionately worse.”

Nozzolio said he would act soon to figure out whether Auburn is being designated incorrectly as an average-needs district. He said he and the other three representatives who met with students Tuesday will write to the state Education Department this week and request a summit to meet and investigate the issue.



“That classification is a question of the math,” he said. “We need to make sure the right numbers are being presented and make sure the right numbers are being received.”

The representatives who met with the group seemed understanding of Auburn’s plight, but reminded them that districts all over the state are in the same situation, or say they’re in the same situation.

Finch said he believes Auburn has done everything it can to cut costs while still improving performance.

Some community members talked about how the school district contributes to a vibrant local culture in Auburn, and without funding, the community as a whole will be harmed.

“We’re not asking for tons of money and whatever we get is appreciated,” said Auburn Junior High School social studies teacher Jeff Alberici. “I want my kids to be able to say, ‘this is a great town to settle in.’”

Students asked questions on the Senate floor and conversed with the representatives. The adult part of the group also met with Sen. John Flanagan, who chairs the Senate’s education committee. They told him they were concerned about the risk of the district becoming educationally and fiscally insolvent.

“We’re trying to do the best that we can and we hope that we can come up with more, and more doesn’t necessarily mean money,” Flanagan said.

As the group was leaving Albany, Gov. Andrew Cuomo, Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver and Senate Majority Leader Dean Skelos released a press release, saying a budget deal had been reached.

Carnes and Lesch said that even if the state budget is done, their efforts were not wasted because Auburn will be facing the same challenges next year if state aid does not change.

“We’re fresh on their minds,” she said. “This isn’t the end. If we can have a part in initializing change, then it was worth it.”

The pilgrimage is not over, even though the bus trip is, according to Lesch.

“This inequity issue -- it’s been a long fight already,” he said. “It’s going to continue.”

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