

Raleigh school board asks governor for money to build new Marsh Fork school – 03/23/07

By Greg Collard, West Virginia Public Broadcasting

Lead: For two years, groups opposed to mountaintop-removal mining have raised safety concerns over a coal processing plant and impoundment dam near Marsh Fork Elementary School. The activists have organized protests, and called for a new school for Marsh Fork at another location. The Raleigh County School Board has also asked Gov. Manchin for money to do just that. Greg Collard reports.

Greg Collard: Last Friday, 13 people were arrested at a protest over Marsh Fork Elementary. The activists had refused to leave the governor's reception room until he pledged money to build a new school. Two weeks earlier, in a letter dated March 2nd, all 5 members of the Raleigh County School Board and Superintendent Charlotte Hutchens asked Gov. Manchin for money to completely fund a new school. School Board member Rick Snuffer says members of the group Coal River Mountain Watch claimed money was available, and that the board needed to make an official request to receive state funds from the governor.

Rick Snuffer: "So what we did was in turn say, Governor, this is what has been relayed to us, and we are more than willing to work with you, if you have the state funds, to build a new school. But we also said we don't have or are able to commit any local funding to the project. It would have to be totally funded through the state, whether it's through the School Building Authority, or special emergency funding – or whatever it may be."

GC: Governor Manchin's general counsel, Carte Goodwin, denied the request to make state funds immediately available. He denied the request in a letter dated March 16th, the same day of the protests. Goodwin wrote that a decision to close a school must first be made at the local level.

Carte Goodwin: "Therefore," he continued, "I would encourage you and your board to place this issue before a vote of the residents of Raleigh County so that they – the local taxpayers that would pay for the construction and maintenance of such a facility – can determine the final outcome of this issue."

GC: That's similar to a separate public statement that Governor Manchin made on March 16th. Manchin said it was a local issue first, but did not address how a new school would be paid for. Lara Ramsburg is the governor's communications director.

Lara Ramsburg: "Normally, as I understand it, when a county is deciding whether or not to build a new school and whether or not there's public support for that, they would take a levy vote. So we are encouraging them to do that in this case to determine if there is public support within the county of Raleigh to do that and to pursue this further. Then I would assume, again as is normally the case, if that levy vote was to pass, then that would be an impetus for them to go to the School Building Authority with a proposal and work through the process that way.

GC: Goodwin's letter says he's directed the School Building Authority to give the issue its highest priority if Raleigh County makes a proposal. Snuffer, the school board member, says he doesn't think the board will put the issue to a vote because it's already in the middle of paying off a 5-year construction bond. He believes Marsh Fork students are safe, but he understands the concerns.

RS: "We have just worked as hard as can to make sure the school is safe, whether it's putting extra filters in the air system, having the EPA come in and check for dust – all these different things. But a coal facility within 300 yards or 300 feet, there's always some danger there. How much? Who knows. It would be the same thing if a nuclear power plant went beside the school somewhere. Anytime you have that kind of a facility, a manufacturing facility or a coal facility that close to the school, there's some inherent danger there."

GC: A Massey Energy subsidiary operates the nearby coal operation. Snuffer says both Massey CEO Don Blankenship and Governor Manchin can be part of the solution.

RS: "I wish that somehow that maybe Mr. Blankenship and his people would see fit to, if they would say, 'OK, we'll put in so much money, the state puts in so much money, the county – who would win? Everybody would win out of that situation. The state would win, Massey could win, and the kids in the community would win. But a lot of people would have to bury a lot of pride to make something like that happen."