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Letters

Date: November 22, 2006 **Section:** Opinion

Business of education well run in Oak Ridge

To the Editor:

An article in today's Knoxville News Sentinel (Saturday, Nov. 18) caught my attention. I was interested to read that land in Oak Ridge has been sold to a developer who intends to build up to 300 new homes. The announcement, according to the article, was met with great pleasure on the part of city officials. Groundbreaking is scheduled for next spring.

For my part, as an elected member of the governing body for Oak Ridge Schools, I immediately started calculating how many potential families the new development might bring, and which of our schools would feel the effects of the additional children that come with families. Would we have enough room in each of the schools; would we have to add teachers? Would we have the furniture and equipment necessary for growth; how much more would it cost us to run bus service? Room in the cafeteria? Enough special area teachers to cover more students? Impact on our preschool? Much like with the decisions to develop Rarity Ridge and Wolf Creek, to my knowledge, no school officials were consulted in terms of the effect of such developments. Well, that's life in the fast lane of a school board member.

However, it does serve to underscore a reality for the Oak Ridge Schools and public school systems everywhere. Running a school system is simply not like running a business. If we were a business, we would have the right to be consulted, and refuse to provide services if we felt we were not equipped to do so. If we were a business, we would increase the cost of our product, and pass it along to our consumers at a rate that we, the business, felt was necessary and appropriate in order to continue providing a high-quality product. Or, if we so chose, we could elect to provide a cheaper product of lower quality. Additionally, if we were a business, we could accept or reject the materials that we receive at our doors to create our product. A business, after all, has to make decisions that are best for that business. A business, after all, has to live within its means.

Unlike business, a school system does not have the luxury of controlling its own destiny. Imagine for a moment if a business had a state law dictating how many employees could share an office, or how many customers your business could service. Classroom sizes are dictated to schools by law; an overage of a few children requires staffing and opening a new classroom.

Imagine a family choosing to keep a well-kept older vehicle for a teenage driver, only to be told by the state that they would have to replace all of their cars on a particular schedule. Bus replacement is dictated by law; whether we can afford new ones or not, we have to replace them on schedule.

Imagine finding out that 300 new people are moving into your house, and you have to accommodate those new residents within your current budget when you've already recently added two other large groups. "Customers" for whom the schools must provide service are dictated by city growth and the vagaries of a location's population.

Imagine receiving a shipment of raw materials that you can choose to ship back because each item is different. Schools cannot reject the children that come to our doors — each with a different background, level of ability, achievement rates, desire to learn and fundamental needs.

Imagine having a state or federal law tell a business owner what level of education its employees must have, and what their course of study must have been in order to work for the business. The schools' primary employees must meet federal, state and local educational standards.

Lastly, imagine that the knowledge and skill of your employees is the overriding factor in the success of your business, but you struggle each year to grant 2 percent raises and have no ability to grant bonuses. Any good business will tell you how critical it is to provide good pay, benefits and working conditions in order to retain highly qualified employees.

School budgets, at least in Oak Ridge, are part of the public discussion and domain. How this school system develops its budget and priorities is a process that is open and available for all who are interested. Spending taxpayer money responsibly is a priority with the School Board, and the exceptional results of that decision-making process (including decent salaries and high standards for all programming components) are reflected every day through the exceptional work, awards and accolades of our teachers, students and staff.

For a standardized reflection of this work, go to the State Report Card link on the Oak Ridge Schools homepage at www.ortn.edu. Compare our work with the work produced by other systems. Take a look at how our community's schools stack up with the other better systems in the state. Then, take a look at our socio-economic demographics and compare us to comparable communities. (This is not your parents' Oak Ridge, in terms of demographics.) Our taxpayers should be proud to know that we do a better job of educating our entire community with the public funding they provide than virtually anyone else in the state. How's that for good business?

Throughout our system's existence, we have received this town's overwhelming support. We have never compared ourselves to other towns, because those other towns reflect different priorities. Oak Ridgers have always valued education and have been willing to reflect those values through strong public fiscal support. The schools, in turn, have not made requests to the city that are arbitrary or capricious. (In fact, it could be argued that setting a multi-year

funding model that does not take into account fiscal realities is more arbitrary than strategic.)

I urge those who are benefiting or have benefited from this community's priority on education to become engaged in the funding discussions currently going on in Oak Ridge. Local dollars have always been the support that has made a difference between our system and others. Nothing magical has occurred in the past four years that changes that. We have never been able to count on state or federal funding to take care of our business of education.

Contact a school board member, talk to our teachers, talk to our students, go see our schools and watch a typical day in the life of a school. Find out what's going on and see if you don't ultimately agree — in running our schools, we've done a pretty good business.

Jenny Richter

Vice chair

Oak Ridge Board

of Education

Canadian visitor

loved 80 East Pub

To the Editor:

We recently hosted our son's groom's dinner at 80 East Pub & Grille. We were exceedingly pleased with every aspect of the service and quality of food at 80 East.

Our 56 guests were treated to a gourmet dinner with excellent service. Guests commented on the quality of both the chicken Florentine and pork loin entrees. The dining room is elegant and comfortable. 80 East owners and chefs were very pleasant, helpful and accommodating to work with in planning our event.

Our experience with 80 East for evening dining as well as this large group dinner has been top-notch. Oak Ridge has a gem of a restaurant that deserves patronage.

Debbie Flatau

Sherwood Park,

Alberta, Canada

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