

Is schools pact still a Win-Win?

Most suburban districts likely to renew land-sharing deal

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A 24-year-old pact that allows areas of Columbus to remain in nine suburban Franklin County school districts is up for renewal in May.

Most districts appear ready to continue the Win-Win agreement, which essentially ensures that school-district boundaries will not change when the city of Columbus annexes land, said Bart Anderson, superintendent of the Educational Service Center of Central Ohio.

Groveport Madison, however, has not decided.

"We're looking at it right now to determine what's at stake," Treasurer Tony Swartz said. "We have to determine the protection we get from the annexation is worth it. ... Someone has got to convince me that's the way to go."

Under the 1986 agreement:

- The Columbus school district does not absorb land when the city annexes property from townships or villages.
- In return, suburban districts pay Columbus schools a percentage of the taxes from commercial and industrial property developed in Win-Win areas.
- Columbus schools get any undeveloped areas that the city annexed after the Win-Win agreement. In some cases, that has created noncontiguous "islands" within the district.

School officials have a two-month window - from April 1 to May 31 - to petition to pull out. If a district would do so, it would stop paying Columbus schools under the tax-sharing agreement. The payments ensure that Columbus schools won't go after Columbus city property that's located in the suburban district.

If districts do nothing, the agreement will be automatically renewed for six years. This is the fourth renewal cycle for Win-Win.

School officials from Canal Winchester, Columbus, Dublin, Gahanna-Jefferson, Groveport Madison, Hamilton, Hilliard, New Albany-Plain, South-Western and Westerville met at the service center Monday to discuss the pact.

All districts involved in Win-Win could be affected if one pulls out.

Reynoldsburg has been the only district to pull out of the original agreement. The district had little territory to protect, and the land wouldn't produce much revenue, officials said.

Columbus schools could have petitioned the state to transfer land from Reynoldsburg schools to the district, but officials decided not to. The area included residential property and retail business along Livingston Avenue, containing about 200 students.

Since Win-Win started, some suburban residents have said the agreement overloads their districts with students who live in the city of Columbus. Some critics have argued the students should be returned to Columbus schools, regardless of the loss in property taxes.

Some suburban residents also believe - wrongly - that students from the city of Columbus pay lower taxes to the suburban district. Residents pay the tax rate of whatever school district they live in, regardless of the city boundaries.

Columbus schools attorney Larry Braverman said Win-Win has "fostered growth in the region and stability and predictability. We're optimistic we'll be able to work through this renewal process early and expeditiously."

The payments to Columbus schools equal 1 percent of the increase of the assessed valuation since 1986 for commercial property in Win-Win areas. Payments are capped each year. This year, Dublin, Groveport Madison, Hilliard and South-Western paid the maximum amount - \$1,050,000. In all, Columbus received \$6.2 million from districts in the past school year.

Dublin's payment protects \$36 million in property taxes, which represents 33 percent of the district's tax revenue.

"To not have Win-Win means some of our commercial and industrial property would be at risk," Dublin Treasurer Stephen Osbourne said.

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