

# LOCAL

## INDUS CONTINUED FROM A1

steps were provided. Some at the meeting wondered if the board would discuss the issue at its April 12 board meeting, but no agenda is available yet.

In taking the 4-2 vote to close the school, the board cited a \$545,000 operating loss, declining enrollment primarily at Indus, and cost savings to the school district. Tammi said the district would be in statutory operating debt because there are more expenses than revenue at Indus School within in 4-5 years, after which the state would take over to get the school back in the black.

Northome School, he noted, has revenue more than its expenses.

Thirty-three people had signed up to speak, following two hours of evidence presented by the school's attorney and affirmed by Tammi.

Some speaking said the closure feels rushed. Others wondering if the timing would make it impossible for students to meet open enrollment deadlines looming for next year.

Some speaking said the school has experienced deficits in the past that were resolved, and it would be smart to discuss options with state Rep. Roger Skraba and Sen. Grant Hauschild, who sent a joint letter expressing concern about the potential closure and said bills at the Legislature may provide some relief.

However, the school's attorney and Tammi said even if the bills pass, they would not be enough money to offset the deficit. They asked that the hearing be postponed until after the session ends.

Steps for appropriately closing the school and making a plan for

the building are not being taken, some said citing those steps call for the Minnesota Department of Education's involvement, a study period and the distribution of information to families in the district.

Speakers said parents and residents did not know the closure was an issue being discussed at the March 8 meeting until just a couple days before.

Since March 8, resolutions from the Koochiching and Lake of the Woods county boards and the Littlefork City Council affirm support for the Indus School and efforts to reconsider closure to allow for further discussion.

Meanwhile, many at the meeting were there to stress that the school is more than just a school, it's a community connection and gathering place that gives young people in a rural and remote area a great education and start in life that they have not or may not get elsewhere. Many speaking - from gray haired alumni grandparents to current students - said Indus School instilled values and welcomed them like no other school would or could.

Area business owners and longtime residents said closing the Indus School will have long lasting far reaching detrimental effects on the area. The school employs 35 people. Losing the school means some may move from the area, exacerbating the declining enrollment and loss of population and tax base.

Closing the Indus School will be the tipping point for the community, said Mike Hanson, former Koochiching County commissioner and former school board chair.

At times during public testimony, the loyalty of the four school board members who do not reside near In-

dus - and who voted in favor of closing the school - to all the students in the district was questioned.

School officials have pointed to the \$26,336 annual per pupil cost at Indus, which now has 104 students, compared to the annual \$20,092 cost per student at Northome, with 198 students. In addition, growing building expenses at both schools must be faced, they noted.

In addition, the evidence pointed to deficit spending in nine of the last 10 years, with the only year not in deficit was 2019-2020 during the pandemic-forced virtual learning year.

Some speaking questioned the board's numbers, noting more was received in timber revenue from Koochiching County, and other sources, than had been shown. Questions were raised about whether interest rates had been negotiated with banks to achieve more money.

Many speaking wondered where the students now attending Indus would go should the school close. And while some of the evidence presented led to the idea that some would attend Northome, comments made by parents, alumni and students said the 82-mile one-way trip to Northome wouldn't allow for students to take part in sports or other extracurricular activities, do homework, or spend time with family.

The school district is legally obligated to provide transportation to all students who reside in the district to another school. The Northome School has the capacity to absorb Indus students should Indus be closed, officials said.

Indus alum Amy Hasbargen Hanson asked the board members to imagine a first grader riding the bus for three to five hours each day.



**Robin Hasbargen asked about the district's finances, adding understanding them are complicated and the two board members who came on board in January need more time to understand them before making wide impacting decisions like closing a school.**

She was among several people with the last name Hasbargen to speak Monday, adding she and other young families have returned to the Indus community to allow her children to attend school there.

Hasbargen Hanson said after her a successful college athletic career and law career, she wanted her kids to experience what she did at Indus School.

She pointed to school shootings and school related gun incidents elsewhere, contrasting the warm, family-feel at Indus.

Jean Hasbargen agreed that only about 25 percent of the students who attend Indus School actually live in the district.

"The rest want to come here and that should say volumes," she said, as the room exploded in applause.