

Decatur Will Face A Vote to Exist

By JEFF NESMITH

Residents of Decatur must soon make one of the most important decisions the city has faced since city fathers 132 years ago told the Western and Atlantic Railroad to take its trains and go to Atlanta.

On the surface, nothing more is at stake than a \$1.6 million school bond issue.

But on each side of the bond issue rages a controversy that actually asks residents of the conservative little DeKalb County seat:

"Do you want Decatur to continue to exist?"

A former mayor doesn't.

To spend another \$1.6 million on the racially changing school system is poor economy, says mortgage banker Jack Hamilton. And he admits that if his argument is extended, it's not economical for Decatur to even exist.

The present mayor, architect Bill Breen, is dedicated to the town's often snobbish traditions. Yet he wants the school system preserved because he believes that the schools and integration are the only things that can save Decatur.

Voting on the bond issue is Wednesday, May 21.

If the bonds are approved, Hamilton says, Decatur residents will see their ad valorem taxes go as high as \$30 for every \$1,000 in assessed property value.

And with the cost of education continually rising, "we cannot maintain an adequate and independent school system on the limited tax digest now existing," Hamilton says, "unless we keep raising the tax rate to meet the requirements."

An alternative, he said, is to simply do away with the town's independent school system and under the Georgia Constitution, DeKalb County would be required to assume the responsibility for educating Decatur's youth.

Hamilton admits that racial

Continued on Page 8, Column 1

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Continued from Page 1

change is the factor behind the growing expense of operating Decatur's school system and at the same time is behind his feeling that the independent system is no longer desirable

FIRST CRACK

Several years ago, a crack appeared in the racial dam between Atlanta and DeKalb county. Within months hundreds of Negro families had flooded through the opening into Kirkwood, a portion of Atlanta that lies in the suburban county.

However, when the surging tide of racial change reached the eastern edge of Kirkwood it did not stop, but continued into Decatur instead.

The town's first reaction to Negroes' buying homes in south Decatur was an ordinance that made it illegal for a man to put a "For Sale" sign in his yard.

Decatur was trying to throw obstacles into the path of change.

It didn't work. Within a year, the change was reflected in the school system, which went from almost completely white to 52 per cent black.

And with the increase in black enrollment, many white people moved out of Decatur, and for those who stayed the financial cost of maintaining a school system went up.

INVOLVE COUNTY

Thus, says Hamilton, Decatur should lay down the burden and allow the county to take it up. He and two other members of the Decatur city commission discussed the idea with DeKalb School Supt. Jim Cherry.

Cherry outlined a plan of segregation that would seem to be the answer to the white man's dilemma in Decatur.

Decatur High School would become a vocational school, he said, and students who did not wish to attend the vocational institution would be bused to county high schools that surround the little city.

The tendency would be toward racial separation, since most of the students attending the

vocational school could be expected to be black, while those being bused to surrounding county schools probably would be predominantly white.

(Cherry refuses to discuss the Decatur situation, which he says would amount to meddling in another school system's affairs. He says he answered Hamilton's questions because they were addressed to him by a city official.)

At any rate, Hamilton feels the Cherry plan could save Decatur. The white exodus will continue, he says, if homeowners are expected to pay more and more for the right to live in the city when the same services are available to them in DeKalb County.

CUT EXPENSES

By giving up the school system, a great portion of this expense will be relieved. Cherry's brand of segregation for Decatur would permit a man to remain in the city without "his daughter having to go to a predominantly black high school," Hamilton says.

However, another group of Decatur leaders believes that only the school system can prevent the town from eventually becoming a black slum and they argue that the bond issue must pass if the school system is to survive.

This group is represented by Mayor Breen, School Board Chairman Scott Candler Jr. and City School Supt. Dr. Carl Renfro.

It also is represented by a group of housewives who have succeeded in convincing private industry to invest money in the school system and are now fighting to pass the bond issue.

"What we have in Decatur is worth fighting for," says Mrs. Deloney Hull.

"We don't want to give up and hand our children this same problem," she adds.

WANT AIDES

Mrs. Hull, Mrs. Thomas Creighton and Mrs. Louis C. Estes recently went to a school board meeting with an offer to help the town obtain private financial support to hire teacher

aides for the rapidly growing classrooms.

Also at the meeting was Roy Blount, president of the Decatur Federal Savings and Loan Association. Blount did not believe the housewives would know how to approach a businessman with a request for help.

"Suppose you were approaching me," he said. "What would you say?"

When the three women had finished, Blount had committed his firm to paying for teacher aides for 10 classrooms for the remainder of the school year.

Since then, the women have been looking for additional financial support—and campaigning for the bond issue.

Their argument, and that of all the school system's supporters, is that the system may be the finest in Georgia. Consistently it outranks Cherry's DeKalb system in terms of number of graduate degrees among teachers, amount of money spent on instruction, amount spent per pupil and in other measures applied to public school systems.

If doctors from the nearby National Communicable Disease Center or professors at Emory University or Agnes Scott College are going to be attracted to Decatur, the pro-bond issue group argues, only an outstanding school system for their children will do the job.

Only the school system can save Decatur, bond supporters say.

And with the racial change that has flooded the town in the past year, only if integration can be made to work, can the school system be saved.

And it'll take the kind of facilities and equipment that only a bond issue can buy, they say.