

Interview with Linda Hoffman

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Interviewer: Philip Pogue

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Pogue: My name is Philip Pogue. We're here for the agriculture project, tied to school reorganization. It's June 8, 2011. We're talking to Linda Hoffman, who will be explaining the consolidation vote that took place in the Wood River area. So we'd like to welcome her to the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Our first question for her would be to give us kind of an overview of your background, family, education and work experience.

Hoffman: All right. My name, again, is Linda Hoffman. I come from a blue-collar family, from Wood River, Illinois, which is a small refinery town in southern Illinois. Both of my parents are still alive. My dad was a union electrician for Union Electric in Alton, Illinois. My mother was a stay-at-home housewife when I was growing up. I have four younger sisters. I'm the oldest of five girls in my family.

I went through Catholic grade school and public high school. My education is, I graduated in 1969 from East Alton-Wood River Community High School, and I went on to go to SIU, Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, where I worked full-time and went to school and received my bachelor's degree in business in 1978.



Linda Hoffman

At that time, I was married, and I stayed home with my three children for a while. Once they were all in school, I went back to work and got a job as a computer programmer at Southwestern Bell Telephone Company and worked there for about seven years. I decided, at that point, to go back to school, because I was interested in psychology. So I went to SIU, Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville. In 1995 I received my master's degree in psychology. [I] then applied and was admitted to St. Louis University in St. Louis, Missouri, where I worked on and received my PhD in experimental psychology in 1999. I did a one-year post-doctoral fellowship at the Missouri Institute of Mental Health and then worked for six years at bioMerieux, which is a French company in St. Louis, Missouri, where I was a senior statistician.

Although I enjoyed work as a statistician, and I enjoyed the corporate experience, I really wanted to be a teacher. So there opened up an assistant professorship at McKendree University in Lebanon, Illinois, and I got that job. I've been there ever since. That was in 2006. I just love my job as a college professor.

Pogue: Did you have any past involvement with school reorganization, before this particular issue?

Hoffman: No, I haven't really. I've always voted in the school reorganization elections that I've been involved with. But that's my only involvement up to this point, until this one.

Pogue: What was your role in this group called Save Our Schools?

Hoffman: Well, that's kind of interesting. I went to the public hearing and found that there was a lot of information being presented, pro-consolidation. But when I asked a few questions about the consolidation and how it would affect the elementary schools, the teachers, the staff members, those kinds of things, I really wasn't given a good answer. So I got more involved in it and was asked to make a presentation, by one of the school superintendents, to the local teachers' union.

After doing some research, I found I was not for the consolidation, because I thought that it would adversely affect the school teachers, staff and the communities involved. So I ended up being the spokesperson, as well as the president, of the Save Our Schools Citizens Committee.

Pogue: What was the actual issue of the merger? Who was—

Hoffman: Involved? All right, the referendum suggested that we dissolve the East Alton and Wood River-Hartford School Districts and the East Alton-Wood River Community High School District, which means there were three districts involved, and then consolidate to one larger school district that would include the East Alton schools, the Wood River-Hartford elementary schools, and the high school.

Pogue: Had these particular districts looked at mergers before?

Hoffman: Yes. Now, within my lifetime, there have been two other merger efforts of these same districts, in 1972 and 1999. Now, in 1972, consolidation was defeated by, I think, a large margin. In 1999, it was defeated again, but by a smaller margin. So, as far as I know, this—in my lifetime—was the third effort, that I was involved in.

Pogue: What kind of history of mergers have taken place in your area?

Hoffman: It's interesting, I think. I don't know a lot about the history of mergers, but I know that, in Madison County, which is where these districts that were included in the consolidation are located, there are only a couple of dual districts, like the East Alton-Wood River-Hartford and the high school districts. Most of the districts are the unit districts. But our neighboring district, St. Clair County, probably demographically, is almost exactly like Madison County. We're both suburbs of St. Louis, Missouri. There are only a couple of unit districts in St. Clair County. Most of the districts in St. Clair County are the dual districts.

What's interesting, I found—in doing a little bit of research—is that Belleville, Illinois, which is the largest city in St. Clair County, has no unit districts. All the elementary schools are their own district, and then the high schools are their own district. So they've got lots of these dual districts in St. Clair County and only a couple in Madison County.

Pogue: Had there been any interest in mergers among these other districts in Madison and St. Clair?

Hoffman: As a matter of fact, right now I think there is talk in St. Clair County for merging...I think it's Lebanon, O'Fallon, and a couple, like St. Rose, some very, very small school districts. But just when it was brought up, all of these small towns began efforts against consolidation. It's just not very popular for these teeny, tiny little towns in southern Illinois, for the most part.

Pogue: How did the Save Our Schools Committee get organized?

Hoffman: Actually, there were a couple of people involved in the efforts, to begin with, my husband for one. He talked to the East Alton superintendent of schools, and together they pretty much organized the Save Our Schools Committee and invited...I mean, I was interested, but they invited me to be the spokesperson. So that's kind of how I got involved. And then several of my sisters and their husbands [got involved]. And then it became a big deal with the teachers and the staff members of the districts being involved.

Pogue: What was the actual consolidation proposal that you were going to be dealing with? What was included in the question?

Hoffman: All right. It was going to be the disillusion of the Wood River-Hartford and the East Alton and the high school districts and the consolidation of the three districts into one larger unit district.

Pogue: And then they would also set the tax rate?

Hoffman: Yes, yes. Which they did in the referendum.

Pogue: And did they also include, in the question, how the board members would be elected?

Hoffman: Yes they did. And this was somewhat of a concern to the smaller communities, because the referendum stated that the school board members would all be elected at large. One of the fears of some of the smaller communities was that they wouldn't be represented anymore, because the larger community might get all of the school board members.

Pogue: And the group that decided all of that was the Committee of Ten? To give our listeners, maybe, a better understanding, what year and month was the consolidated vote?

Hoffman: It was in...I think it was April 6, 2011, was the vote.

Pogue: So that's a very recent one.

Hoffman: Very recent.

Pogue: How long did the campaign last?

Hoffman: Well, the pro-consolidation people had worked on this for about two years, getting together the Committee of Ten, having the regional superintendent hearing and all of that. Our group, the Save Our Schools Committee, only really worked on our side of this issue about two months.

Pogue: How many public meetings were held, prior to the vote?

Hoffman: The pro-consolidation group had four public meetings, and we had three public meetings.

Pogue: When you said four and three, did that mean that the Committee of Ten sponsored four, and you sponsored three?

Hoffman: Yes.

Pogue: And what kind of meetings were they?

Hoffman: They were public meetings in various locations throughout the three districts that were involved in the merger. Generally a PowerPoint presentation was made, and then there was a question and answer period, afterwards.

- Pogue: And were there any particular rules established, because emotions can sometimes get high at these kinds of meetings?
- Hoffman: Yes, yes, yes. The meetings became contentious, to say the least. So, yes. After the first public meeting, it was decided that there would be the presentation, and then there would be a short break, where people were given index cards. They could write their question on the index card. And then they [the cards] would be selected at random from a basket, and they would be answered.
- Pogue: And what if a question was not covered during the public meeting?
- Hoffman: Well, both sides said that they would be willing to answer in private by email or however the person wanted their questions answered, so that everything would get answered. And we ended up, both sides having websites where people could ask us questions, and we could answer the questions, on the websites.
- Pogue: So, you said there were seven organized, public meetings. Did the Save Our Schools group sit down with the Committee of Ten to iron out rules, or was this—?
- Hoffman: No, it was kind of learn as you go. The pro-consolidation people had the first public meeting. There was not much structure to that meeting, and it was contentious. So, after that, I think both sides learned how to do it better. So, if I had it to do over again, I know that I would begin with more structure and making sure that, at the very beginning of the meeting, you set forth the rules of the meeting, how it will take place.
- Pogue: How many attended these meetings?
- Hoffman: We probably had, I would say, thirty to forty at most meetings. Our final meeting of the Save Our Schools Committee, we had about 100 people at that one. That was the final meeting, before the election, because, let's see, our final meeting of the Save Our Schools was March 31, so it was right before the election. That had about 100 people.
- Pogue: The first public meeting, what month and year was it?
- Hoffman: They all took place in March and April...I guess March of 2011.
- Pogue: So you had seven meetings in roughly a month's time.
- Hoffman: Yes.
- Pogue: And where were these meetings held?

Hoffman: At the Wood River Recreation Center, which is the roundhouse in Wood River, the Keasler Recreation Center in East Alton, the Hartford Recreation Center in Hartford, Illinois. We had one of ours, because we needed more space, at Julia's Banquet Center in East Alton, Illinois. I guess they were all at those places, because both sides had a couple of them at the Wood River Roundhouse, the recreation center in Wood River. So we had them several places.

Pogue: Was there a regional superintendent hearing about the reorganization question?

Hoffman: Yes, that was in November of 2010.

Pogue: And what topics were covered at that meeting?

Hoffman: That was the public hearing that was facilitated, I guess is the word, by the Regional Superintendent, Dr. [Robert] Daiber. That was held at the Wood River High School auditorium in November 2010. It was publicized in the newspaper, and the public was invited to attend.

This was at the point where the...I believe the Committee of Ten read their referendum and what they were intending to do. And then, you filled out a card with your name and address, so that they were certain that you were part of the districts. Then you were invited to come up and ask a question or make a statement, really make a statement, more than anything else, about your feelings on the consolidation.

Pogue: So, for our listeners, was there a table with the Committee of Ten present or a spokesman from the Committee?

Hoffman: Yes, a spokesman for the Committee of Ten.

Pogue: And what role did the regional superintendent play?

Hoffman: He was the moderator or the facilitator for the hearing. He made sure that everything was done properly, that every member of the public who wanted to speak, who had filled out a card, got a chance to make a statement or say whatever they wanted to say.

I think that the purpose also was to collect the names and addresses, because when the referendum became official, everyone who had spoken at the public hearing was sent a letter, telling them that the referendum was going to be on the ballot.

Pogue: Were there many questions asked at the hearing?

Hoffman: Yes, there were actually a lot of statements and questions at the public hearing. The superintendent didn't answer any questions, because he was

there to facilitate and moderate. The Committee of Ten answered the questions. But mostly it was for people to make statements.

Pogue: And did members of the three boards of education or the administration or teachers groups make statements?

Hoffman: I remember that board members made statements. I know that some of the superintendents were there, but none of them spoke. A lot of teachers made statements, there at the meeting. And then the public, just voters, people who could vote in it.

Pogue: So we reviewed basically the role of the regional superintendent's hearing, and then the regional superintendent agreed, after the hearing, within a certain timeframe, that this would go onto a ballot election, and that was determined to be in April of 2011?

Hoffman: Yes.

Pogue: What seemed to be the big issues presented, about wanting to merge the two elementary districts with the high school?

Hoffman: Several things. First of all, the pro-consolidation group suggested that the merger would provide curriculum articulation, which is coordination of the curriculum across the elementary districts. Doing that would therefore improve the test scores, the Illinois State test scores, for the high school. They also suggested that it would save people in property tax money for their real estate. And their third basic argument was that everyone else in Madison County pretty much was a unit district, and we should be too. We were old fashioned.

Pogue: As far as the state money incentives, had the districts merged, what were those incentives?

Hoffman: The consolidated district would receive, over a four-year period, about four million dollars, about a million dollars a year, to assist the districts in their merger.

Pogue: Was there a feasibility study done for the three districts?

Hoffman: Yes. There was a feasibility study done by Doctors Phillips, Day and Bogle from...I think it's Midwestern School Consolidation Research, something like that. They've done over ninety of these feasibility studies in the state of Illinois. All of them are from the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. So, I think they are quite well versed in doing research in school consolidations.

Pogue: And why did their study indicate not favoring a merger?

Hoffman: I think that, after reading the 248 pages—which is not easy reading, but I’m a college professor, so (laughs) I don’t mind reading long papers like that—it seemed to me that there were several issues that stood out to me.

First of all, there didn’t seem to be a great deal of gain, for the districts. There was a lot of curriculum articulation going on already. They’re small districts, and so they’re neighbors, and they already talk to one another. So, they were already doing that. What stood out to me was that the recommendation of the feasibility for what the property taxes would have to be, after consolidation, would mean that the East Alton School District people would realize a tax savings in their property taxes, but the Wood River-Hartford School District people would not. Their taxes would be raised a little bit, based on the information in the feasibility study.

So, I really think that, in these hard times, with the idea of possible teacher layoffs, school closings, staff layoffs, and even though it would be a slight tax increase to the Wood River Hartford people, I think there wasn’t enough benefit, at this time, to recommend consolidation.

Pogue: Did the three individuals that you talk about present their study results at a public meeting, or was this just presented to the three districts?

Hoffman: It was a public meeting, I believe in July 2010. It was a PowerPoint presentation. This was a point of contention. What happened is, in the 248-page feasibility study, there were no real recommendations made in that study, to merge or not to merge.

I think the Committee of Ten found that to be unclear. Which it was unclear. So, they invited the researchers to present, at the high school, Wood River High School, in July 2010, their recommendations. So it was in the PowerPoint presentation where they clearly stated, no recommendation for merger at this time.

Pogue: As far as the issue of merger, what were some of the major concerns expressed by either Save Our Schools or other citizens?

Hoffman: The reason I really became involved in this issue, on the Save Our Schools side, was teachers and citizens, particularly the citizens of Hartford, were quite worried about the changes that would happen.

One of the concerns was that, in a merger, in these hard times, where the State of Illinois is in economic crisis, there is always a question as to whether a unit district would receive the four million over four years. In the past it’s always been that, eventually the school district does receive the payments, but in our lifetime, we’ve probably not been in such economic hard times as we are right now.

There was a great deal of concern about closing Hartford Elementary School. That's the smallest of the three schools. It just was very likely that that school would become closed, and attendance centers would become the way to go, where one of the elementary-middle school districts would become the middle school, and one of the elementary-middle school districts would become the elementary school. So (laughs) although these are small towns, and we're very close together, parents don't like the idea of having their children bussed out of their neighborhood to a different school.

I experienced some of that. I raised my kids in the Edwardsville School District, which is a large unit school district in Madison County. And when my youngest child was in, I think, third grade, she had been walking with her older brother and sister to the neighborhood elementary school, which was a block and a half from where we lived. And they decided in Edwardsville to go to attendance centers. So for, I think, third, fourth and fifth grade, my youngest daughter was going to be bussed to Glen Carbon, which is a town very close to Edwardsville, but it's about a fifteen-minute bus ride. She was very small and hated it, didn't want to go to school anymore, because she wanted to walk to school with her older brother and sister. But that had been changed. So, parents really don't like attendance centers, where they lose the neighborhood schools. We're small towns, and we like the small-town feel, I think.

And then [there was] the idea that teachers and staff would lose their jobs, particularly at the junior-high level. The feasibility study said people will lose their jobs. There would be transportation issues. We'd probably have to go with the large bus systems, to bus the kids around, because that's not the way we're set up now with the three districts.

Pogue: Did the Committee of Ten indicate that there would be attendance centers, or was that to be decided, if it passed?

Hoffman: I think their fallback position was always that that would be decided after the referendum passed. The problem with that was that was an area of contention at many of their public hearings, because people continually asked [about it] [It] seemed like a position that didn't give any information, because the feasibility study did say that it was very likely that this would occur, that there would be staff and teacher layoffs, that there would be attendance centers, that there would be transportation changes. And whenever the Committee of Ten were asked these questions, they said, "Well, that's the decision of the school board, once the referendum passed."

Pogue: As far as the high school improvements, did the high school have a noticeable problem on state testing, and is this what triggered some of the discussion?

Hoffman: Yes. And that's what really bothered and surprised me. I went to the high school there, but I went back in the '60s, when times were good and there was

a lot of industry in that area. It was a refinery town. We had all the oil refineries in Wood River. East Alton had [a] steel mill, Olin [Olin Industries], lots of industry in the area. So property taxes were low, and times were good. Now, most of the refineries have left. Olin is preparing to leave the area. There is not much industry in the area. Times are hard, and there are a lot of low-income people in these districts.

When I looked further...I'm a researcher and a statistician, so I decided to look into some of the issues of test scores in the high schools. I looked at every single high school in Madison County, and I did a correlation between percentage of low income families in the high school and their test scores. That was a very strong correlation. So, the relationship is actually more of test scores to low income than it is test scores and unit districts.

So, I think that there needs to be something done in the area to improve income levels. I don't know what that's going to be, but I think it is somewhat of an issue that needs to be addressed separately. Consolidation, I couldn't as improving test scores in the high school.

Pogue: Often when unit districts merge, they talk about adding courses, as a supporting reason for merger or allowing more athletic or drama, music, fine arts opportunities for students and having a larger system, so that different things can be offered to more high school students, without them having to be bussed from maybe a co-op type program. Were any of those included in the issue?

Hoffman: I think one of the things that was in the feasibility study is that our high school actually offers a lot of those opportunities, currently. I'm not sure that could be improved a great deal through a unit district. There's also a lot of cooperation between the different schools and high schools in the area already.

I think that the issue of high school test scores were put out there, as if that would be miraculously improved with consolidation.

One thing that consolidation would have done, that I looked into—that wasn't really brought up in any of the public hearings—was the fact that currently East Alton-Wood River High School is receiving federal funds to make improvements, and they have made some improvements. If the school districts consolidated, those funds would be lost, because all of the sudden, the test scores for the elementary and the high school, all of those test scores, kind of become...I don't know if it's exactly averaged, but they all get put in together, and it's a unit district. So, the extra funds for the high school wouldn't be available.

Pogue: We touched already, a little bit, about the tax rate, and I have listed that it was \$5.35, and you indicated that that became somewhat of an issue, because one

part of the proposed merged areas would have a decrease, and others would have an increase. Anything else about that tax rate?

Hoffman: Yeah. That was a real point of contention. The feasibility study stated that the tax rate necessary for operating the unit district, at the same level, would actually be \$5.99 per \$100 of assessed valuation. In the referendum, the Committee of Ten decided to make it \$5.35. The \$5.35 tax rate would be a tax decrease, across the board, for all the districts involved. But the question was, was that really a sustainable tax rate? It met the basic—I guess “standards” is the word—for the referendum. But, because there would be absolutely no increase in the tax base, because these districts are all included in the high school tax base already, there would be no increase in the tax base through this consolidation. There wasn’t a lot of evidence that the \$5.35 tax rate would be sustainable over the long term, particularly after the money from the State of Illinois ended.

Pogue: Did any of the tax rate discussion deal with the fact that unit districts are not allowed to tax, in some funds, the same way as dual districts? For example, the working cash is five cents for unit districts, but duals can tax that for both elementary and high school. There are a couple of other funds, like the Life-Safety fund, same way. Did any of that come up that, actually, those tax opportunities would be lost to the combined unit?

Hoffman: Yes, it did. My husband is an accountant, and he got really into the financial areas. He and one of the superintendents really looked into that and found that, through the unit district, it seemed as if we would be, over the long term, losing some of the taxes that we currently could have.

Pogue: As far as the view of the merger proposal by the three school boards, the three superintendents, the teachers unions, mayors, government officials, did any of them have positions?

Hoffman: Yes. With the three school boards, it was mixed. It was probably fifty-fifty on the school boards. Some were for; some were against. With the three superintendents, one was against, one was for and one was neutral (laughs). So, again, that was kind of a wash.

Pogue: Jumping back to school boards, you said they were mixed. Was that the three individual boards had a mixed view on each board?

Hoffman: Yes, it was individuals. I know many of the school board members. These are small towns. None of the school boards came out and said, “We’re for or against” by a vote. But individually the people involved in the school boards, it was very mixed, with some of the school board members being members of The Committee of Ten and others of the school board members being adamantly opposed and members of Save Our Schools.

Pogue: As far as the teacher unions?

Hoffman: They were against, but some of them seemed rather fearful of repercussions from superintendents who were either neutral or for the consolidation. So they worked hard in the background, but they did not speak out too much.

Pogue: Did any of the mayors or governmental officials take a position?

Hoffman: The mayors stayed out of it. The government officials worked in the background, several of them, for Save Our Schools, that I know of. I have no idea if any of them worked on...No, I do know that. Several of them worked for pro-consolidation, as well, but more in the background and not being very vocal.

The regional superintendent said in the newspaper that he was remaining neutral on that. He spoke to The Committee of Ten people, and he spoke to us and gave us each something for our side and something against our side. So, he remained neutral.

Pogue: Did any of the other tax groups, such as Farm Bureau or Chamber of Commerce, take a position?

Hoffman: No, not really, no.

Pogue: As far as student achievement and school debt, did either of those play a role in the campaign?

Hoffman: It was brought up in the public hearings, about school debt particularly. I guess this is also a small-town thing, that the Wood River people would ask if they were going to be made to pay off East Alton's debt and vice versa. That was always brought up. The debt, the way I understand it, stays with the district. It was always with. So, East Alton debt would stay with the East Alton people and vice versa. That never seemed to sit well with people. They were always worried that Wood River people were going to be paying off something in East Alton and vice versa, which is interesting but probably the way small towns are.

Pogue: Did the number of school administrators for the reorganization play a role in the campaign? Obviously, in Governor (Patrick) Quinn's call to reduce districts, basically, the only justification he said in the news releases was that this would reduce administrators.

Hoffman: Yes, that did play a role. My husband really got into that issue. He looked at unit districts and how many administrators were in the unit districts, based on the number of buildings, because that seems to be the key. There is an administrator or principal at each school building, as well as a superintendent and sometimes assistant superintendents.

What he found is that actually there seemed to be, in many of the districts, more administrators in a unit district than in the dual districts. But

that was brought up [at] every public hearing, and the pro-consolidation people said that we would be down...We would have one superintendent who would be totally responsible for the entire district; therefore, things could get done much more quickly than they could currently, with three separate superintendents.

The other side of that issue is that a superintendent with a smaller district is more in touch with the needs of the community and the students and the parents in the smaller district. So, it kind of went back and forth on that. Nobody really seems to like school administrators, but everyone knows that they're necessary. So that became contentious with both sides.

Pogue: Were there any studies that each side used to support its position on the vote?

Hoffman: Well, both sides used the feasibility study, which was interesting. And then, because I'm a researcher, I researched several other studies, because I wanted to use very current research, if possible. And I found...I have to look it up here, but there is a very current study, done in 2011, talking about the pros and cons of consolidation. And what they stated is that, basically, consolidation doesn't afford the unit district all of the benefits that it promises, or it hasn't in the past. And whenever we get to economic hard times, the first thing that many people want to do is consolidate these little school districts and save property tax money and do good things like that, and have economic benefits. But it hasn't been borne out in the research.

Pogue: Having now looked at April 2011, what seemed to be the two or three hot-button issues? We've talked about a number of them, but if you had to break it down to two or three, what would they be?

Hoffman: Property taxes, teacher layoffs and the closing of the Hartford Elementary School. Those were **the** three, I think, determining factors. [This is] the breakdown of the vote, East Alton, which pays the highest property taxes as a district, voted for consolidation, because regardless of what tax rate would be used, their taxes would be lowered, because they pay very high property taxes. And theirs are probably going to go up, because they're about to lose Olin Industries.

Wood River, it was very close and overall, in Wood River, consolidation passed by a tiny margin in Wood River District.

In Hartford, the vote was strongly against consolidation. It was actually the Hartford people and the people in Wood River who voted against consolidation, that defeated it. It was defeated by the narrowest of margins, 104 votes.

Pogue: How did that compare with 1999?

Hoffman: [In] 1999, I think it was defeated by about 1,000 votes.

- Pogue: So, the Hartford are, which you talked about potentially losing their elementary, that was a major decider?
- Hoffman: Yes.
- Pogue: Did the media take a position on the merger, or did they just provide more information?
- Hoffman: It depends on who you ask. At the beginning, there was a lot of information on pro-consolidation, from the media. Then when Save Our Schools was organized, the pro-consolidation people claimed that the local media was presenting too much of the Save Our Schools side of the issue. And, in the end, I think it was pretty well balanced.
- Pogue: Were there any editorials from the newspapers?
- Hoffman: No.
- Pogue: So the editorial board did not—
- Hoffman: No.
- Pogue: And the newspaper that's dominant in that area, is that from Belleville?
- Hoffman: No, it's the *Alton Telegraph*.
- Pogue: *Alton Telegraph*. Did the governor's call for reducing the number of school districts have an impact on your area?
- Hoffman: It became a question that was asked at every public hearing, "How would that impact us?" So, I did some research on that, and actually, if Governor Quinn's ideas came through, it would not just be our three little districts consolidated. What I read in one of the Springfield newspapers was that he wanted to consolidate school districts for a population of about 35,000 people.
- What that would mean would be the consolidation of East Alton, Wood River-Hartford, our high school district, as well as Roxanna and probably Bethalto, to be the size that Governor Quinn was talking about. And if any of us thought it was contentious, trying to consolidate these three districts, oh my goodness, if we tried to add the Roxanna School District, and or Bethalto that would just never pass a public vote (laughs).
- Pogue: Since the vote was in April, has there been interest in running the referendum again?
- Hoffman: I think there was a lot of talk about it, immediately after. A lot of people from the pro-consolidation side said, "Well, this is just horrible. We're going to do

it again, immediately.” I don’t think they can. But now it’s just totally died down. It’s as if none of this ever happened. (laughs)

Pogue: You talked about the boards having individuals for and against. Superintendents had differing positions. You talked about some heated discussions at public hearings. Has a soothing effect taken place since April?

Hoffman: I think so. One thing that’s happened is that—at least on the Save Our School side—a lot of us have started—more than we used to—going to the school board meetings, the local school board meetings, and becoming involved in issues like that, particularly my husband. He may consider running for school board at the high school sometime, because he’s gotten very involved and interested in the school board.

Pogue: What recommendations would you give the governor, or members of the General Assembly, who are calling for fewer school districts, many of them with more severe proposals, such as county-wide schools, one school board; having the State Board of Education make recommendations to close schools, and then, if the General Assembly didn’t act, it would still be put into place?

Now it’s more of a commission, twenty types of groups, representing the political spectrum of school organization, to come up with some recommendations. Having been in this, do you have some recommendations?

Hoffman: I think that the governor... I understand his position, but I think he and the General Assembly and the commission need to look at things outside of the economic benefits. I understand those, but whenever you have people involved, students, parents, teachers, staff members, superintendents, you need to look more into how it affects everything and everyone and not just the economics of it.

I think that, economically—and I said this from the beginning—what made more sense in our area is to consolidate East Alton, Wood River-Hartford with Roxanna, because in that way, the tax base would be increased, which would actually reduce property taxes, because when you increase the tax base, then you get to reduce the tax rate. But that would never sit well with the people of the area. So, it’s not ever about straight economics—what’s the best cost benefit for the people?—because people like small towns; they like neighborhood schools; they like their kids being able to walk to school.

We don’t like school closures. It leaves a blight in a neighborhood, to have a school building closed. We’ve got a couple of those in our area. The Catholic school that I went to when I was a kid is closed now. So it sits there. This big school building sits behind the church, and nothing is in it. So it becomes a blight in the neighborhood.

Pogue: Will you personally be watching what the commission is doing and having any interest in that?

Hoffman: Yeah, I work closely with my colleagues in the School of Education at McKendree (University), and this has kind of given me a wake-up call as to things that go on, that I've always been interested in, when my kids were in school. I was always involved in...I went to school board meetings, and I was greatly involved in it, in their education and schools.

But I learned so much throughout the Save Our Schools thing that I did, that I really want to stay involved in it and find out more information.

Pogue: A couple wrap-up questions. You talked about the PowerPoint presentation. In that presentation, were there a couple of key slides that seemed to really hit home in the discussion?

Hoffman: Probably. First of all, looking at the research, the research that consolidation might lead to teacher and staff layoffs, closing of school buildings, attendance centers, bussing. I think that's important. I think just looking at the different areas of research, because the Illinois State Board of Education had a report that I talked about in the PowerPoint. Several of the research issues presented in the PowerPoint, I think are important.

Pogue: Would it have been easier to consolidate the two elementaries, and leave the high school out?

Hoffman: I think, yes. That wouldn't be an easy sell there either. I'm not sure. I say, yes, and then I think, I'm not sure. I really am not sure, because I think it would still...I think the only way the people, particularly of Hartford, would vote for consolidating those districts—regardless of how you configure it—would be the Wood River-Hartford School District, Elementary School District.

If it ever closes, Hartford Elementary School, then that's off the table. And I think, at that point, the people of Hartford wouldn't be for it, but I doubt if they would vote strongly against it. I think they would probably just not be interested in it, thinking it won't change anything, regardless of what they do.

Pogue: Well, we certainly appreciate your giving us your time to go through the close election that was held in the Wood River- East Alton area. You certainly have given us a good look at all of the questions that were raised during this particular campaign issue, and it was a very close vote. There were several April ballot initiatives. Some got passed; others got defeated, so it was kind of a mixed view as to where we are with school reorganization in the State of Illinois. I thank you for your time.

Hoffman: Thank you.