

Bonny Oaks School Board

Dissolved; Reactions Mixed

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by Mark Kennedy

Times Staff Writer

Action by the Hamilton County Commission Wednesday to dissolve the Bonny Oaks School Board of Trustees drew mixed reactions from patrons of the 88-year-old child retention facility.

Calling the decision "wise and visionary," Bonny Oaks board chairman Bryn Patten retreated further from his initial opposition to the proposal.

"Some of my (board) members think I have surrendered too easily," Patten said. "But I'm filled with great optimism. We have a chance to win on several counts."

But former school supervisor Malcolm Adamson urged county officials not to tinker with a child-care formula

"which is tried and true."

Legally, the controversy became moot Wednesday with a unanimous vote to transfer control of Bonny Oaks to the county's Department of Human Services May 19.

In a series of resolutions, the County Commission voted to authorize a transitional management for Bonny Oaks School; allow County Executive Dalton Roberts to begin developing a land-use formula for the 320-acre property, and to establish the "Child Services Fund of Hamilton County" from profits on the sale of any Bonny Oaks land.

The commission pledged to protect the salaries and benefits of the current Bonny Oaks staff.

Roberts has estimated the value of the property at \$6 to \$12 million — an asset that could do much to improve the quality of child care in the county, he says.

The commission created two advisory committees, the Bonny Oaks Heritage Advisory Committee and the Bonny Oaks Area Resident Advisory Committee.

For now the school will continue to serve the 38 children at the facility — at least until the advisory committees offer placement alternatives.

Bill Bennett, chairman of the commission finance committee, has recommended continued funding for the school through next year.

"The No. 1 thing in our minds, the uppermost goal, is child care," Bennett said. "I think we should let the committees proceed slowly."

"I don't see any way to close it at this time," said Commissioner Paul Nolan, education committee chairman. "As I look at these resolutions, in no way do they abolish Bonny Oaks. It's simply an integration into the child care management of Hamilton County."

However, Bonny Oaks has considerable money in its "special contributions fund" which the county cannot, by law, absorb. School officials say they plan to form a non-profit group, "Bonny Oaks Child Care Foundation," to channel this money into other worthy child-care efforts.

George Campbell, former secretary of the Bonny Oaks board, said the contributions fund now amounts to nearly \$500,000.

Campbell said he has resigned from the board rather "than to be abolished by a headline... suggesting that I might try to tamper with \$15 million of county property."

Campbell said 16 children from the school in the past two years have been placed in "alternative situations," only to be returned. He produced a letter written by city schools Superintendent James McCullough calling attention to the virtues of Bonny Oaks School.

"The grief that I have over the plight of children, who do not have satisfactory home situations, is that there are not more alternatives such as this," McCullough wrote.

Charles R. Yell, president of the Bonny Oaks Alumni Association, said his group will "seek policies consistent with the decision of the commission."

Yell added, "It is our fond hope that these current events are not signaling an end to the illustrious school, but rather, heralding a new beginning."

Resolutions passed by the commission do not specify how many acres of the Bonny Oaks property will be protected from sale. Nolan said the commission would await recommendations from its advisory committees.

In other action, the commission approved funds for construction of a \$177,943 headquarters for the county Election Commission on the corner of Georgia and 4th avenues.

Harold Coker, chairman of the building committee, said the new building will consolidate the election offices now