



NORTH WILDWOOD – Around 400 Crusaders ascended to the second floor of the North Wildwood Fire Hall at 15th and Central Avenues to support efforts to save their beloved Wildwood Catholic High School.

1. There were so many supporters in attendance that Fire Official Lew Ostrander had to ask many of them to listen to the presentation from downstairs because the crowd exceeded the legal occupancy of the firehouse.

A group of about a dozen key Crusader alumni and parents organized the meeting in order to give other concerned stakeholders an update on the state of the negotiations with Bishop Joseph Galante and the Camden Diocese, which plans to close Cape May County's only Roman Catholic high school and use the building as a new elementary school for current students of Wildwood's St. Ann and Cape May's Our Lady Star of the Sea schools.

Many said the closure is all about money.

Richard Bischoff, whose daughter hopes to one day attend the school, served as the facilitator of the meeting because, as he said, he was the loudest and maddest over the planned closure of the school.

According to Bischoff, the diocese has determined that if it isn't shut down, Wildwood Catholic will eventually bankrupt the St. Ann parish. The current enrollment at the school is 194 and is projected to drop even lower in coming years if left open.

After receiving a letter from Wildwood Catholic Principal Richard Turko announcing and accepting the closing, Bischoff said he couldn't believe it.

"How about this instead, we are mad as hell and we are not going to take it anymore!" Bischoff wrote in a letter to the principal. "I am not willing to just give up and pray, my daughter and the other children depend on me and the other parents and alumni to exhaust all options available before conceding defeat."

Bischoff said the group petitioned the bishop to change Wildwood Catholic from a parish school to a diocesan school, which would open it up to additional funding opportunities. On Jan. 5, the bishop said no.

The latest, Bischoff said, was that the diocese would be continuing with their closure plans, but would listen to viable business plans.

"So that's what we're going to do," Bischoff said.

Local attorney Bob Sandman, a Wildwood Catholic alum, is donating time to the group for legal advice and to help them prepare a business plan to present to the diocese.

Sandman said the school has a unique opportunity to create a business plan with new programs in a small campus setting that would attract new students and present a situation that the diocese can't afford to close.

He said that he and other professionals could volunteer their time to teach students. He suggested

that he personally would teach law classes three hours a week.

Thousands of supporters are flocking to the group's Web site savewildwoodcatholic.com as well as its Facebook page "Keep Wildwood Catholic High School Alive," which now has over 1,700 fans. Joseph Catanoso, alum from the class of 1980, who oversees the group's Facebook fan pages, said the number is growing every day.

"It's viral," he said.

People can add letters and other content to the site and keep up to date with the movement on these pages, he said.

For those who don't know how to work with Facebook technology, Catanoso said, "Check with your kids. They'll show you how to do it."

Bob Mullock, whose three children graduated from Wildwood Catholic, predicted that if the high school closed, the elementary schools would follow in three years.

Mullock revealed a piece of the group's business plan, noting that they were seeking \$5,000 pledges from 100 donors in 30 days. He said that would show the diocese that the group was serious in their resolve to keep the school open.

Mullock and his family have helped rebuild in different parts of the world following disasters. He said that churches and schools in post-Katrina New Orleans were rebuilt and those in earthquake-ravaged Haiti would be too. If they can do it in those places, "How can we let our school die?"

"So, buck up," Mullock said. "We're coming to you (for donations)."

"I'll be the first one," someone called out from the back of the standing-room-only crowd to a round of applause.

Bischoff said that Cape May County municipalities were also supporting Wildwood Catholic's cause by passing resolutions in favor of keeping the school open. Upper Township, Avalon and Wildwood have already passed resolutions in recent days and others are likely to do the same at their next regular meetings.

"This isn't just about the building over there," County Republican leader and Crusader alum David Von Savage said, pointing in the direction of the high school which is right across the street from the firehouse. "It's bigger than all of us. This island, this county, we need that place over there."

Catanoso remarked that the problem isn't just in this county. It's going on all over.

"A group at North Catholic (in Philadelphia) is having the same kind of meeting at this very moment," he said.

Two current students read letters they wrote expressing their feelings about their school.

Senior Crusader Jeri Anne Gerace said she wasn't sure she wanted to attend Wildwood Catholic when she was looking at high schools four years ago.

“However, what I saw made me fall in love with it. I saw hundreds of students who were involved in many clubs, and sports. Along with the students I met a faculty which was willing to spend the extra time to ensure that each child got the education that their parents were paying for,” she said.

“I do not want to be the last part of the tradition that has become a part of so many people’s lives. I want the tradition to outlive me so that my children and their children may attend the same school I did.”

Similarly, sophomore Susan Boswell, 15, wrote in her letter that she was surprised when news of the closure came.

“On Jan. 5 after an enjoyable winter break it seemed as though each student’s world had been turned upside down. When the announcement was solemnly made I found that I could not restrain my tears,” she wrote. “Thinking of how this would affect my future was one of the worst feelings I have ever endured. It has never crossed my mind that my time at the school I have always dreamed of attending would be a short-lived experience. I have always visualized myself walking away from my high school career with a Wildwood Catholic diploma tucked proudly under my belt.”

“I am writing this letter to ask for a chance to allow our school and community to come together and try to show you what our school represents,” she said.

“My only complaint is that I, nor my community, had been warned as to what was being discussed behind closed doors which resulted in no input on our part. I feel if the community had been notified about these issues something less drastic could have been done over time. Instead of a more sensible approach, we received a brief notice that would strain the hearts of so many.”

During a question and answer session at the conclusion of the meeting, one supporter Tom Boswell asked if the group was supporting the current plan of withholding money from St. Ann’s Sunday collection basket.

Bischoff said it was a good idea to continue the practice to let the diocese know the group means business by hitting them in the pocketbook. He said to keep the money in escrow until the Wildwood Catholic situation was resolved.

Tom Melchiorre, another supporter from the crowd, noted that the group is “not fighting the church. We are the church.”

That remark also met applause from the large crowd.

In the end, Ostrander, the fire official, apologized for having to be the bad guy who separated the crowd at the beginning of the meeting, but let everyone know that he also had three children graduate from Wildwood Catholic.

“I’m a supporter too, but if the crowd is this big next time, we need to find another venue,” he said with a smile.

Go Crusaders.