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HEADLINE: RESIDENT ASKS STATE TO RULE ON NEWSLETTER

by Phashant Gopal, Courier-News Staff Writer

HILLSBOROUGH -- A resident has asked the Commissioner of Education to decide if a Board of Education newsletter on a \$54 million high school referendum is propaganda.

Randy Enterline, a member of the Somerset-Middlesex Libertarians, sent the complaint to the Commissioner of Education Wednesday.

The eight-page newsletter produced by Boyar and Sandler School Communications "can be fairly characterized as a propaganda piece," the complaint reads.

Boyar and Sandler received \$7,500 to handle a pre-referendum publicity campaign.

"It's obviously propaganda," Enterline said. "It's very clear when you read it in total, where the Board of Education stands and how they want you to vote."

The newsletter encourages residents to call their neighborhood principal, saying "He or she is very knowledgeable about the bond referendum and the positive impact it will have on their specific school."

In a similar case in 1993, the Old Bridge Board of Education was "cautioned" by the Commissioner of Education for "crossing the line separating information and advocacy" with an informational video publicizing an April budget vote.

"If you look at the film, the majority of the film is a presentation of the material," Old Bridge Board of Education administrator Gregory Quirk said Wednesday. "At the conclusion, some of the board members on the panel endorsed the budget, and that's what the commissioner

objected to."

Hillsborough Board of Education President Peter Conlon said he is not worried about Enterline's complaint.

"It think it (the newsletter) is objective." Conlon said. "We tried to be as painstakingly objective as we could. But the facts, once you read them and see them, will lead you to make a decision. The Board of Education believes if you know the facts, you will make the same decision we have."

Frank Belluscio, spokesman for the New Jersey School Board Association, said punishments in similar cases have included warnings or injunctions preventing distribution of fliers or newsletters. And though it's rare, the referendum could be "thrown out," he said.

Loye Rose, a member of the Hillsborough Neighbors of Color school and community committee, say the newsletter is not "one-sided."

"They have tried to convey as much information as we needed to understand the process and to understand the ramifications of voting down the referendum," she said. "You are not going to satisfy everybody one way or the other."

Sandy Boyar says the public relations firm tried to simplify the information.

"We were just hired to get out information," he said. "This is an emotionally charged thing obviously. I think the nature of a referendum is emotional."

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