Mayor: Sever financial bond between city, school district

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Exasperated with her limited options in the Rochester City School District and denied by two state judges in an attempted referendum, Rochester Mayor Lovely Warren on Monday called for something even greater: severing the financial relationship between the city and district altogether.

In a letter to the state, Warren said she supports earlier calls for some sort of investigation or state action related to the recently revealed $50 million shortfall in the district.

She then went further, asking the Legislature to change the state law that makes Rochester and the state’s other large city school districts coterminous with those cities.

“As the District’s financial backstop, the City of Rochester and our taxpayers are gravely concerned about the state of the District and the potential consequences to not only our children, but also the City’s fiscal health,” she wrote. “I ask that you work with your partners in government to completely sever the connection between the City and the School District, and empower it as a distinct entity.”

It is the law in New York that the Big Five districts — New York City, Buffalo, Rochester, Yonkers and Syracuse — are an exact physical match to the municipalities themselves. They are also distinct from other school districts in not levying property taxes directly.

Abolishing that relationship would be a massive project in the state Legislature, especially if it applied to the four other large city school districts as well. Warren’s letter made no reference to how, exactly, it would be accomplished.

A city spokesman said Warren is agnostic on the details of the breakup, including whether RCSD would then gain taxing powers like other school districts.

Warren, who bills herself as “the education mayor,” has grown increasingly frustrated over her inability to make changes in the district. And like mayors before her, she bristles at handing over $119 million every year without any input in how it is spent.

Her proposed referendum on a state takeover was rejected by the Appellate Division of the state Supreme Court earlier this month. Then came word of the missing money, which threatens a $50 million revenue anticipation note the city recently issued.

“The School District’s misrepresentation to the City and the bond rating agencies could have a material effect on our ability to conduct business in the future on behalf of our residents,” Warren wrote. “Given the recent Court rulings, and also given the urgency and importance of many critical projects happening in our city, we ask that the State act expeditiously and in accordance with the recent court decisions.”

On Monday afternoon Council President Loretta C. Scott and Finance Chair Malik D. Evans released a joint statement requesting, among other things, that district representatives appear at a meeting Oct. 10 to explain the situation. A similar unveiling is already planned for Oct. 8, at the school board’s audit committee meeting.

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Mayor Lovely Warren wants to separate the city’s and the school district’s financial relationship. JAMIE GERMANO/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE