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Title: Member, Rochester School Board; WRVSVU PK-12 Operating Study Committee

Committee: House Education Committee

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Good morning. As I have indicated above, I am member of the Rochester School Board (my second three year term), and also a member of the White River Valley Supervisory Union PK-12 Operating Study Committee.

First, I want to thank Representative Sharpe and the other members of this committee for the opportunity to provide testimony today. And also to thank Committee Assistant Marjorie Zunder for her efficiency.

Additionally, I want to note the opportunities “to ask questions about the future of education in Vermont and how it relates to the 2017 Legislative Session” that Representative Sharpe and other legislators have provided, through a number of “Evenings With Legislators.”

Because of attendance at a PK-12 Study Committee meeting, I was absent from the “evening” in Williamstown on January 12 which Representatives Sharpe and Haas attended, in good company with Senators Cummings, McCormack, and McDonald. Rochester residents and Rochester School Board member Amy Wildt reported that they found the evening informative and valuable, even convivial-- well worth the stresses incurred on that accident-defying, “pea soup fog” drive from Rochester that evening. And they thought the legislators who attended felt likewise.

My purposes in appearing before the Committee this morning is to make a case for extending the “conventional merger” deadline beyond, July 1, 2017 and also to offer Committee members something like a “report from the field. And I would also be happy to respond to questions that Committee members might have, after my presentation.

Rochester School Board members and our Supervisory Union have been engaged in consolidation-, school structure, and expansion of educational opportunity-related activities since well before the passage of Act 46. Some background: Since 2014-15 five Windsor Northwest towns (Granville, Hancock, Rochester, Stockbridge, Bethel) and five Orange Windsor towns (Royalton, Sharon, Strafford, Tunbridge, Chelsea) have been working closely with the Agency of Education and the State Board to combine the two supervisory unions into the one White River Supervisory Union (WRVSVU), which became operational on July 1, 2016. During 2015-16 WRVSVU undertook large-scale strategic planning with the International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE) to map out a more detailed direction for education in the region. A Strategic Plan 2016-21 document framed upon Quality, Opportunity, Equity, and Efficiency goals, each goal with its multiple objectives and “blueprint for change” action plans, was the result of these efforts. And in the midst of all this work, Act 46 was signed into law and has pushed our communities to consider further structural changes.

Our Supervisory Union has complied, and with good will, purpose, and continuing focus, with implementing the provisions of Act 46-- through a “conventional merger” process, with Steve Dale (former VSBA Executive Director) as our consultant. At the outset two years ago, four “preferred structures” were apparent and 706 Study Committees were established: a PK-12 Operating (Rochester, Bethel, Royalton, Chelsea), a PK-8/Tuitioning (Tunbridge, Strafford), a PK6/Tuitioning (Sharon, Stockbridge), and a Non-Operating (Hancock, Granville).

However, the Report submitted just this Monday to the State Board of Education for review and approval at its February 21st meeting proposes the creation of only three school districts: a PK-

12 Operating (Rochester, Bethel, and Royalton), a PK-8/Tuitioning (Chelsea, Tunbridge), and a Non-Operating (Hancock, Granville), with Strafford and Sharon deciding they could best achieve Act 46 goals through not merging with a school in another town and each planning to submit an “alternative structure” proposal; and with Stockbridge, “an Act 46 orphan” (desiring but unable at present to merge with a school in another town), and thus also planning at present to submit an “alternative structure” proposal.

In speaking before this Committee, I want to make the case for extending the “conventional merger” deadline beyond July 1, 2017. And the case of Stockbridge offers a first strong rationale for doing so. The members of the Study Committee from Stockbridge participated in the PK-6/Tuitioning meeting upon meeting, “conventional merger” work of this committee and, through no lack of effort or diligence, have been unable to complete a “conventional merger.” Before the July 1, 2017 deadline, there is clearly not enough time for Stockbridge to begin another “conventional merger” process. Thus, unless this July 1, 2017 deadline is extended, —and again through no fault of its Study Committee or its School Board members—Stockbridge will not benefit as it should from the five goals of Act 46 nor from the financial “incentives” the statute offers (e.g., access to transition support funding, merger support grants, yearly reductions in tax rate).

And Stockbridge cannot be an isolated case amidst all the towns in Supervisory Unions currently engaged in “conventional merger” activity across the state. In the paragraph above (relating to WRVSU’s Study Committee process), I hope I have indicated clearly enough that Supervisory Unions such as White River Valley-- simply in the nature of their geography, topography, and existing school structures-- are subject to more complicated outcomes in making their entirely good faith, “duly diligent” efforts to implement the provisions of Act 46. *Res ipse loquitur*, I would think. The case of other towns in Vermont which find themselves in Stockbridge’s situation should be, I would hope, a second strong rationale for extending the current “conventional merger” deadline.

As I have indicated above, Rochester, Bethel and Royalton have submitted a PK-12 Operating District proposal for review and approval by the State Board of Education at its February 21st meeting. The core of this proposal is a PK-12 restructuring of educational delivery in our three towns, “Model 1” (as it’s known)—with PK-5 education offered in each of the three towns, with Middle School education for all grade 6-8 students from the three towns offered at the current Whitcomb MS/HS building in Bethel, with education offered to all High School students from the three towns at the current South Royalton School, and with a “repurposing” of the Rochester MS/HS building as an innovative Outdoor Experiential and Environmental Educational Center. (A Design Team will be “fleshing out” details and potential for this Center. As for me, I’ll be on a Center-related “site visit” to Walden School in Vergennes on February 15.) This model was approved by the PK-12 Study because it provides for the best implementation of the five goals of Act 46—Equity, Quality, Efficiency, Transparency, and Accountability. And the information, the charts, the details, the financials, etc. provided in the twenty nine pages of the PK-12 Operating Study Committee Report amply support this and make a strong case for a “Yes” vote in Rochester.

As a Study Committee member from Rochester and as a Rochester School Board member I will be supporting this proposal and with enthusiasm-- at upcoming Community Forums, at the Rochester School meeting, at the special April 10 informational session, on the street, in our stores and cafes. As an earnest of that support, I will be gathering the signatures needed for submitting my nomination papers for one of Rochester’s three seats on the new District Board.

All that said, I am quite aware that some Rochester residents will vote NO to his proposal. At a Community Forum in Rochester to present (the then) three possible Models, Rochester School Board members also distributed a questionnaire. One of the three models was the current Model 1 of the PK-12 Proposal. Of the forty people who attended, thirty eight indicated they were Rochester residents; and of the thirty who indicated they would vote for one of the three models presented, twenty seven indicated (ranking each 1-4) that they liked Model 1 LEAST of the three, and twenty nine indicated that they like a Model 2 BEST (a model with Rochester and Bethel MS students educated in Rochester; with Bethel and Rochester HS students educated in Bethel; with South Royalton as a PK-12, with Chelsea and Tunbridge probably tuitioning HS). But, in the event, Model 2 did not receive Study Committee approval. ("It didn't offer enough to South Royalton" was WRVSU Superintendent Bruce Labs's assessment.)

The apparent Rochester issue with Model 1 is that it calls for the transportation of Rochester's MS students to Bethel and of Rochester's HS students to South Royalton. And at a recent School Board meeting, one of our constituents presented us with a "Say NO to High School in SoRo" petition. The value of this petition as a barometer of the upcoming vote is unclear to me; but it is of value as a clear expression of sentiment. While transportation of students (particularly to South Royalton) is the rallying cry, I believe that the real issue is a perceived unfairness in the current proposal.

And I would add that Rochester member of the Study Committee Jess Arsenaault did propose another "fairer to Rochester" model, Model X—with Whitcomb in Bethel as the combined HS site, and MS sites in Rochester and South Royalton—which we believed that Rochester voters WOULD have approved. But this Model did not receive the approval of the Study Committee, over concerns (as I recall) about capacity at the Whitcomb MS/HS building. And, in truth, this proposal did not best implement the five goals of Act 46, as the proposed Model 1 does.

So, I have to hope that on April 11 by Australian ballot that Rochester voters will approve this PK-12 proposal. On the merits, because I believe that it is a good proposal for Rochester; and also because of the severe property tax consequences for Rochester residents of not approving this proposal by the current July 1, 2017 deadline. And I will do everything I can to affect a favorable vote, including "poll standing" with my sign (some boiled down version of: "Vote Yes. This is a good proposal for Rochester, And we—you and I-- can't afford the property taxes of a No vote.") in the parking lot of the Rochester Town Offices.

But I have no way of knowing how many and which voters will "show up" to vote on April 11, what information they will have, etc. (And it wouldn't surprise me that some Rochester resident during the day might be holding up a "NO to HS in SoRo" sign along with me in the parking lot.) Further, I know that I have no good "safety net" answer for "What if Rochester residents vote this proposal down?"

However, I do know that Rochester Student Committee members and School Board members have done everything they could faithfully and fully to participate in implementing the provisions of Act 46 through the Study Committee process. And out of simple fairness—the third strong rationale I am offering--, I would request that the Education Committee provide a bill which extends this conventional merger deadline beyond July 1, 2017 and which continues to provide the "conventional merger" incentives. In the case of a close vote in Rochester, so as to allow time for a "revote." Or, in the case of a lopsidedly NO vote, so as to allow Rochester and its School Board the time to initiate another Act 46 "conventional merger" process.

How long an extension? My preference, not only for Rochester but for towns across the state like Rochester and Stockbridge, would be the one year extension which Representative Ancel's bill proposes. And I would expect that merger deadlines extensions would be granted only to towns or districts (a) which could demonstrate they had faithfully implemented the provisions of Act 46 (e.g., through participation in a Study Committee) and (b) which could provide some "objective criterion" (such as a failed merger vote) that an extension of the deadline is needed.

In closing, I want to thank Committee for listening this morning to the rationales I have provided in my testimony for extending this merger deadline and for listening to its "unfolding of Act 46 complexities" which I hope has offered something like the advertised "report from the field."

If there is time and Committee members have questions for me, I would be happy to try to respond to them.

Thank you,

Francis Russell

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