

BARRE SUPERVISORY UNION DISTRICT #61

Barre City Elementary and
Middle School

Barre Town Middle and
Elementary School

Central Vermont Career Center

Spaulding High School

John Pandolfo
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*Doing whatever it takes to ensure
success for every child.*

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To: The House Education Committee
From: John Pandolfo, Superintendent, Barre Supervisory Union
Date: January 26, 2017
Re: Act 46 Testimony

Thank you for hearing my testimony, on behalf of the Barre Supervisory Union. As you may be aware, we have been actively engaged in efforts to implement Act 46, and have experienced successes and challenges since the inception of the law. Our November 8, 2016 vote passed overwhelmingly in Barre City and failed to pass in Barre Town. A revote in Barre Town is scheduled for next Tuesday, January 31, 2017.

Background:

- The Barre Supervisory Union is made up of two communities and three school districts:
 - The Barre City School District oversees Barre City Elementary & Middle School. The school has an enrollment of approximately 950 students (875 Equalized Pupils for FY17) serving grades PreK-8. The school's FY17 budgeted Total Elementary Expenses for FY17 are \$14,039,665 and Elementary Educational Spending per Equalized Pupil spending is \$11,862, one of the lowest in Vermont. The district is currently governed by a nine member board, transitioning to a seven member board this March due to a change in city charter. Barre City School has a reported Free/Reduced Lunch population of 60% and is a Community Eligibility Provision school, which means all students receive free meals.
 - The Barre Town School District oversees Barre Town Middle & Elementary School. The school has an enrollment of approximately 890 students (796 Equalized Pupils for FY17) serving grades PreK-8. The school's FY17 budgeted Total Elementary Expenses for FY17 are \$11,489,139 and Elementary Educational Spending per Equalized Pupil spending is \$11,860, also one of the lowest in Vermont. The district is currently governed by a five member board. Barre Town School has a reported Free/Reduced Lunch population of 24%.
 - The Spaulding Union High School District oversees Spaulding High School and the Central Vermont Career Center. The high school has an enrollment of approximately 750 students (789 Equalized Pupils for FY17) serving grades 9-12. The school's FY17

- budgeted Total Union High School Expenses for FY17 are \$12,744,370 and UHS Educational Spending per Equalized Pupil spending is \$12,873, which I believe is the lowest in Vermont. The district is currently governed by a seven member board, with four members from Barre City and three members from Barre Town by proportional representation. The Central Vermont Career Center serves approximately 160 students from about 20 different towns and has an annual expense budget of approximately \$2.9 million. Because Spaulding High School is made up roughly equally of students from Barre City and Barre Town, its Free/Reduced Lunch population is approximately the average of those of the sending schools (around 40% reported and likely higher in reality).
- We are the largest school system in Central Vermont, made up of large schools. Through sound fiscal management and economies of scale, we have been able to operate efficiently and still provide our students with a quality education.

Merger History:

- In the mid-1980s, and after much discussion and debate, the Barre City and Barre Town communities formed the Spaulding Union High School District. Prior to that Barre Town paid tuition for students to attend Spaulding High School.
- In 1994 the City of Barre signed over ownership of Spaulding High School to the Union High School District, in effect giving half ownership of the high school and property to Barre Town for the sum of \$10.
- In 1996/1997 the Barre Supervisory Union was created, encompassing the Barre Town School District, Barre City School District, and Spaulding Union High School District.

Act 46 Activity prior to the November 8, 2016 vote:

- In the summer of 2015, after the passing of Act 46, the boards of the Barre City and Barre Town school districts voted to begin an Exploratory Study:
 - A study committee of ten members was appointed under 16 V.S.A.706, with five members from Barre City and five members from Barre Town.
 - A budget was set per 16 V.S.A. 706
 - A \$5,000 study grant was secured under Act 156.
 - A consultant was hired through the Act 46 Implementation Project.
 - The committee met monthly from September through January.
 - An informational web page was created and maintained on the Barre Supervisory Union website (<http://bsuvt.org/joomla/index.php/act-46>).
 - A public forum was held in January, 2016; this forum was moderately attended.
 - An Exploratory Report was published recommending a formal Merger Study for the communities and districts within the Barre Supervisory Union.
- In February 2016 the formal Merger Study began:
 - Seven of the ten members of the Exploratory Committee stayed on for the Merger Study, and three stepped down and were replaced.
 - A new \$20,000 study grant was secured under Act 156.
 - The same consultant was retained through the Act 46 Implementation Project.
 - The committee continued to meet monthly.
 - The informational web page was kept up to date over this period.

- The committee decided to recommend a vote to the communities, and set a vote date of November 8, 2016.
- Articles of Agreement were drawn up, and board configuration was set at nine members, four directly from each community and one at-large voted by overall majority from both communities.
- Two more public forums were held in May and October; very few people attended either forum. Surveys were sent out in May/June and August/September. The second survey received several hundred responses, and indicated overall (combined Barre City and Barre Town) support of 66% yes to 34% no in favor of a merger.
- The committee presented a Final Report to the State Board of Education on October 18, 2016, which was enthusiastically approved. The State Board asked why Barre chose not to pursue an accelerated merger. We answered that we wanted to be thorough in our work and not rush the process. The Final Report and Secretary of Education's letter to the State Board are provided here as handouts.
- Committee members wrote letters to the editor and posted in Front Porch Forum in both communities advocating for a "YES" vote.
- Twelve total people ran for the nine seats. Two Barre City seats were contested. The at-large seat was contested, with one candidate running from each community.

The November 8, 2016 vote:

- Shortly before the vote date a "NO" contingent emerged in Barre Town:
 - Signs were posted to vote "NO" by one individual in yards and at street intersections in the last week before the vote.
 - A candidate for a House Representative position made robo-calls in the last week before the vote advocating voters to vote "NO".
 - The same candidate stood outside the polls yelling for people to vote "NO" as they entered the polls.
- Barre City passed Article 1, the merger article, by 75% "YES" to 25% "NO"
- Barre Town failed to pass Article 1 by 57% "NO" to 43% "YES"
- Because there are only two communities involved, both communities needed a positive vote for a successful merger.
- For Article 2, the Barre Town candidate won the at-large seat, so the elected board is comprised of five Barre Town and four Barre City residents. Unless Article 1 passes the elected board has no standing.

The Revote:

- A group of Barre Town citizens submitted a petition for a revote, signed by >5% of the registered voters, per 17 V.S.A. 2661, within 30 days of the original vote date.
- The Barre Town School Board, as the legal authority per statute, set a vote date of January 31, 2016, within 60 days of the petition submittal date.

Challenges:

- For the revote to be legally successful it must pass with a "YES" count of 2/3 of the number of "NO" votes in the original vote, plus the "YES" vote must be the majority. This means at least 1406 "YES" votes plus a majority. This is a challenge since many less

voters turn out for revotes or any votes outside of a November election. The high turnout on November 8 is not working in favor of a successful revote.

- There has been a history of contention between the two communities that dates back over a century. The formation of the Spaulding Union High School District was very contentious. There have been defeated efforts to combine some of the municipal aspects of government in recent years, such as emergency services. Barre Town residents believe they would be required to share in Barre City's high municipal tax rate as a result of a merger.
- There is a belief, fueled by information being disseminated, that Act 46 will either be repealed or that the state will never force communities to merge against their will.
- There is a belief, fueled by information being disseminated, that Barre already meets the requirements of Act 46 because of the size of our districts and our low Educational Spending per Equalized Pupil. Information is also being disseminated that we will be allowed to operate as an Alternative structure because of this and because the community wants to.
- "NO" constituents have raised concerns that Barre Town will contribute significantly more in the way of fund balances and other assets, and that their taxpayers money will be spent in Barre City. In actuality the projected fund balances on June 30, 2017 differ by \$200,000 in a collective \$40 million budget, or 0.5%.
- "NO" constituents have raised concerns that Barre Town will pay for Barre City's excess spending, based on assumptions that Barre Town is more fiscally responsible than Barre City.
- It is not said as directly, but "NO" constituents have raised concerns that Barre Town students will be forced to mix with Barre City students, either by changing school structure, changing school attendance boundary lines, or setting up policies for elementary school choice.
- "NO" constituents have raised concerns that educational quality will decrease at Barre Town School as a result of a merger.
- "NO" constituents have raised concerns that Barre Town property values will decrease.
- I am providing copies of several informational postcards and flyers, as well as FaceBook and Front Porch Forum posts on both sides of the issue, so the committee can understand how the challenges look at ground level.

I can state honestly that I believe all parties are operating with best intentions, but this is a challenging issue representing change for two communities that have significant history and emotions around collaborating.

Thank You!

John Pandolfo