

April 4, 2017
Vermont General Assembly
House Education Committee
Montpelier, Vermont
Public Hearing: S.122

Dear Committee Members:

My name is Sharon Ellingwood White, School Board Chairperson, Lemington Vermont. "Where is Lemington"- is the first question I often get. In this visual (attached 2 sided document) you will learn and then never forget where Lemington is. In the most northeast corner of the Northeast Kingdom of the map you will find Lemington, population 104. A population of abundant forests, fields, and wildlife exponentially surpasses the number of residents. There are more maple tree taps, streams, critters, woods than people. However on this map, among this beauty, the best of Vermont, you will see why we have come to casually call ourselves, the "black eye" of Vermont Notice the color on the chart depicting our Homestead Education Tax rate . It is the highest in the state of Vermont. It is the highest by quite a large margin from the next town down. We are off the charts without comparison to other towns and by quite a large percentage.

This has put us in an extreme position regarding school merger which is why we voted down joining the NEK Choice consolidated district at Town Meeting. Our current tax rate is too high for us to join with the 5% throttle in place. If the throttle were removed, I believe that our residents may vote to join. We live in a town in the poorest county in the state (Essex), in the most rural and most underserved part of the county. We have no infrastructure other than literally, a tiny town hall and a couple of dirt roads. As our School Superintendent Chris Masson testified last week, our taxes have more than doubled in two years. This was due to a wildly sharp increase in new students. Then, by using a two year Equalized Pupil average, insult was raised to grave injury. Taxes were then artificially inflated by a calculation where we are not getting credit for students we actually have (versus the average which was used). This is a formula designed for declining student populations. Declining is a trend for the state of Vermont, it hurt us, and we got hammered by an unintended consequence of formula. Our residents have not recovered. Our aging tax base is choosing between their tax bill over essentials like food and home heating oil. Our non-resident tax rate is lower than our resident base. The burden exponentially flopped to our already strapped residents. I have grave concerns about how we can educate our children.

The 5% throttle locks this "black eye" situation in for Lemington for an extended period for years to come. We voted down merger because we are better off taking our chances by hoping no more children move into town, than by merging. This is backwards and inefficient. The law is meant to improve the lives of children on terms that taxpayers can absorb. How do children benefit when parents have to list their lifetime home with a realtor? We can't afford to merge and we cannot afford to stay out either. How do you choose?

I am behind the intent and spirit of the NEK Choice School District consolidation committee and their eager hard work toward accelerated voluntary merger driven by Act 46. Merging can help our residents overall. I drove 3 hours one way in this weather, and the other 3 hours at night across the roads of the Kingdom to ask you for your help and consideration getting Lemington into S. 122.

Some voiced solutions are the following:

Can we get our old tax bills recalculated to reflect our actual students instead of a 2 year equalized average and be refunded?

Can we re-vote and get on board with NEK Choice at the merged rate?

Can we abolish the 5% throttle?

What other ideas are there?

This is not Lemington's first request. We have asked, written, begged for consideration for over a year. We saw it coming. We've all had crash courses in education funding. This is very confusing and complex for 104 people with a small voice who don't even have a school. In Lemington we do not have WCAX, radio, newspapers, or places to go with this. If we were a city, would we have been heard sooner? Other towns with unique issues are already in S.122, why aren't we? It could be any small town that got here due to the math. But it's Lemington. So here we are. Will you please come to the table with us for ideas on relief and compliance?

My roots are among the deepest in Lemington. Both sides of my family are original settlers of Lemington dating back to the 1800's. To live and stay in Lemington Vermont with the commitment of almost 2 centuries takes a very creative, independent and self sufficient strength. Going it alone isn't always the best idea though, which follows the spirit of this merger. At this time, we need help understanding how you can write us in to S.122 as a true outlier in the puzzle of Acts 153 and Act 46 so we have every chance to enjoy possibilities for voluntary, accelerated compliance.

Lemington is a well kept secret. A majority of residents view the beautiful ribbon of the CT river east from our muddy dooryards, and our backyards look toward the west of Lemington which is 95% forested. We are guarded by the sentinel of Monadnock Mountain which makes a good show boasting of Vermont's beauty puffing up over the river staring proudly down at our neighbors in New Hampshire. We would like to stay here, while raising some of the brightest kids in the state so Lemington has a very collectively strong, secure future.

Sincerely

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