

House Education
Margaret MacLean
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Chair Peacham School District

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www.peachamact46.org

Context

Thank you to the committee for considering S/H 15. This bill would do much to level the playing field and allow districts to meet the goals of Act 46. Before we specifically discuss the situation in Peacham some contextual information is important for you to consider.

We are one of **69 districts** statewide that due to their history, geography and local values would benefit from considering alternative structures. This number is approximate and likely to increase, after voting this spring. For the most part these districts represent the rural parts of Vermont for which S/H15 is designed. A careful examination of all the options, preferred, conventional and alternative will allow them to find the best way to meet the goals of Act 46. For Vermont communities and for the State of Vermont the goals are the outcome to achieve, the mechanisms-preferred, conventional, alternative are merely the administrative route to reaching the goals. We believe that a reading of Act 46 clearly underlines this intent of the law.

There are a number of Act 46 study committees currently in 706b form who describe themselves as stalled or making limited progress, some have taken breaks for several months out of frustration with the process, for example, WSESU [Brattleboro] 5 districts WSESU [Windsor] 4 districts, WCSU [U32] 5 districts and the 706b representing OESU Bradford Newbury and Blue Mountain SU 4 districts, they will all find the ability to fully explore an alternative structure helpful. There maybe others we are unaware of. **Total 18 districts**.

Additionally there are many districts who have chosen not to access state grants for their exploration of Act 46, NCS [Newport] 13 school districts, SU 60 4 districts, SU 05 6 districts SU22 3 districts, Stowe SD and SU 24 1 district. It would be a mistake to think these districts are "doing nothing" many have spent hours considering Act 46, they just have not accessed state grants to do so; you should be applauding them for this. For example, the 13 districts in NCS are engaged in a comprehensive year - long public engagement process with expert outside facilitators paid for locally. **Total 28 districts**.

Other districts are in the exploratory stage, OSSU [Hardwick] 5 districts, Folsom Education Center in South Hero, Peacham SD and Stannard SD are in the process of exploring all their options, including alternative structures. This is what brings us here today. **Total 8 districts**

There are yet more districts FNWSU [Enosburg] 5 districts and OCSU [Orleans] 6 districts and Orwell, have rejected merger proposals and disbanded their 706b committees but wish to meet the goals of the law. **Total 12 districts**

Finally Individual districts such as Barre Town, Waterville and Cambridge have also voted NO to merger and as yet not re voted. **Total 3 districts**

Currently there is a disparity, which S/H 15 will rectify, an uneven playing field, which disadvantages rural districts from meeting the requirements of the law and reaching to meet the goals.

If due to local demography and history a group of districts can come together and choose to form a preferred structure they reap benefits - access to financial resources to pay consultants and tax incentives are examples that are written into the law. This privileges the choice of this structure above the other options.

If due to local demography, geography, history and local values, neighboring districts feel the best way for their region to meet the goals of the law is through an alternative proposal they do not have access to the same privileges.

This is exacerbated by differential in timelines and the fact that districts cannot equally review and compare options. S/H 15 does much to rectify this, allowing a full exploration of all the possibilities before deciding on the best way locally to meet the goals of the law. This makes your consideration of this bill significant and timely.

Thank you for bringing it to the table early in this session.

* Please note the Map presented by the Act 46 Implementation Project last week dates 1/23/17 [Jeff Francis and Nicole Mace] is inaccurate in these instances. Peacham should be blue not yellow they have never joined a 706b committee. Stannard should be blue not yellow they are part of an exploratory committee. Greensboro is in SU35 not SU9 and should also be blue not yellow. Blue Mountain, the towns of Wells River and Groton is its own SU and not a part of OESU SU 57. There maybe additional inaccuracies with the map we are unaware of.

Here is specific information regarding the Peacham process to date. Mark Clough Peacham School Board Chair will speak to this section.

PEACHAM School District Act 46 Work to Date

1. Expanded school board from 3 to 5 members March 2016
2. Formed Act 46 study committee with 9 members March 2016
3. Established website www.peachamact46.org
4. Explored 4 options - 2 in partnership with other districts - utilizing 2 x initial \$5,000 grants.
5. Prepared an 11 page report with a clear set of recommendations

The 2 formal explorations participated in by Peacham SD one a PK-6 merger with Greensboro and Stannard and the other a PK-8 merger with Walden, Barnet and Waterford have not moved to the 706b stage for technical reasons [PK-6 merger] and an inability to best meet the goals of the law [PK-8 merger].

Unless the technical issues with the PK-6 merger can be resolved, which is unlikely, Peacham does do not have a viable route to merger, which would meet the goals of the law.

We do however have the ability to better meet the goals of the law in an alternative structure. However currently the rules and process for alternative structures are unclear and inconsistent with other pathways to meet the requirements of Act 46. Consequently we are unable to continue our progress.

H15 is helpful, as it would allow Peacham to do its part, along with all the districts in the state, and make its best effort to meet the goals of the law. It is unfortunate that due to our local circumstances, our history, geography and neighbors we are not able to access tax incentives or fit into the model the state "prefers" but that is the reality. We are one of the poster children for what Act 46 describes

as an Alternative Structure and we are waiting for clarity and the opportunity to comply with the law that S15 would offer.

Additionally we have ideas to make an alternative structure a viable way of meeting the goals of the law. We are meeting regionally to discuss the formation of a **Rural Education Collaborative** encompassing 5-8 districts [Alternative Structures or merged districts] that would collaborate on a larger regional scale to provide economies of scale, to support innovation, and other shared services. Approx. 19 Rural Education Collaborative exist nationally, Margaret MacLean and John Castle the Superintendent of North Country Schools met with them in Oct 2016 in Ohio at a gathering organized by **Battelle for Kids** and we are excited to develop this concept.

Here is a link to the work of Rural Collaboratives nationally.

<http://www.battelleforkids.org/learning-hub/learning-hub-item/generating-opportunity-and-prosperity-the-promise-of-rural-education-collaboratives>

Act 46 is about improved quality, efficiency, equity, accountability and transparency; this requires innovation, imagination, collaboration and cooperation not mere compliance with rules. The language that S/H15 adds to Section 5 of Act 46 recognizes the importance of collaboration and cooperation as a part of an alternative structure. This allows us to move beyond mere compliance with rules to innovate and cooperate regionally to meet the goals of the law.

We have read in testimony from Nicole Mace that to change the rules at this stage would make districts that choose preferred structures "angry". Please remind them they are receiving tax incentives, and the law already privileges their choice. We are not here asking for tax incentives. They chose to enter the preferred structure, we assume because it was the most effective way to meet the goals of the law in their situations; we have not or are unable to choose the preferred structure. We are here simply asking for a level playing field of options to meet the goals of the law. We are stepping up and doing our part as citizens and community members to meet the goals and currently the law is not allowing us to make progress. We have also spent countless hours on this work and we feel it is only fair that the alternative pathway described in the law is equally available for consideration.

Please also remember the reality is we are not talking about a handful of small remote places like Peacham or Marlboro, or South Hero rather we are talking about 69 districts, a number that will climb over time, S/H15 is needed now.

Based on this testimony we urge you to pass S/H15 to allow rural districts the opportunity to comply with Act 46.

**Thank you
Margaret MacLean**

Recommendation for consideration related to S15.

Currently Act 46 does not require the use of a 706b structure to form an alternative proposal. In considering this bill please remove the use of the 706b process in forming an alternative structure for districts that have disbanded their 706b committees or districts that have never formed a 706b committee.

The 706b process is designed for the development of a Union School District. An alternative structure is not a Union District rather it is an Alternative proposal, which is modeled on a restructured supervisory union more effectively aligned with meeting the goals of Act 46.

A supervisory union has the advantage of freedom and unity, freedom to make local decisions, as appropriate for local circumstances, for example for districts like Peacham with a distinct operating structure regionally, unity for decisions, which are best made centrally.

The work of an "Act 46 Alternative Structures Committee" would be to look at all the governance functions and decide which are best managed centrally and which are best managed locally in an effort to best meet the goals of the law.

An Act 46 Alternative Structures Committees would be groups of equal districts making these decisions together as SU's have historically operated. A 706b committee is subject to proportional representation a structure, which is inappropriate for Alternative Structure discussions.

An Act 46 Alternative Structures Committee may include districts within current SU boundaries but will also likely involve larger geographical groups, which will meet the goals of the law through dissolving smaller SU's and incorporating them into larger Alternative Structures.

Districts with existing 706b committees could vote to disband and form an Alternative Structures Committee or continue their work if the statute was amended to allowed for equalized representation for this purpose.

Margaret MacLean