



Talking Points for Patrick Reen's Testimony on School Construction Aid to House Education & Institutions Committees 2/18/20

1. Thank you to House Education & Institutions Committees
2. Patrick Reen - Superintendent for Mount Abraham Unified School District (MAUSD) - 4th year
3. Challenge - providing high quality, cutting edge, proficiency-based and personalized learning in worn out facilities reflective of the educational philosophies of the distant past.
4. The Mt. Abe Story -
 - a. Opened its doors fall of 1968
 - b. Construction completed summer of 1969
 - c. Significant projects In the past fifty years - 2005 addition of 8-10 classrooms, 2007 addition of wood chip boiler
 - d. The school currently carries no long-term debt
 - e. On a good day - accessibility challenges (a single, less than reliable elevator, band room filled with concrete risers, etc.), lack of daylight (several classrooms with no exterior windows), pass through classrooms (students in one classroom can only exit through another classroom), outdated science labs (chemistry lab has drench shower with no floor drain), decrepit bathrooms & locker rooms, dated classrooms, hallways, auditorium and cafeterias. Some rooms with insufficient heat. No sprinkler system. Ongoing plumbing, electrical and security concerns.
 - f. On a bad day - responding to emergency needs: aging drainage leading to flooded gym floor in October 2017 requiring immediate replacement and significant disruption to the school day (\$250K), tiles falling off wall in locker room in 2018 exposing mold (locker rooms slated to be replaced summer 2020 at estimated \$1.9 Million), december 2019 aging boilers stop working
5. The Funding Chapter of the Mt. Abe Story -
 - a. 2014 Feasibility study conducted laying out significant facility needs at Mt. Abe. Estimated cost to bring building infrastructure alone into proper operating condition - no cosmetic, natural light or configuration improvements - \$17 million - Bond attempt #1 for \$32.6 million on 11/4/14 fails 27% - 73%
 - b. FY 17 Mt. Abe Board recognizes growing facility need and adds \$1 million to budget in a construction services line - begin meeting needs now with hopes of applying this money to a bond payment in the future
 - c. FY 18 \$1 million put into facility (repaired crumbling maintenance garage, new furniture throughout the school, new flooring, etc.) - great community outreach - 5 forums, select boards, fire depts, senior luncheons, general stores - wide agreement in community the facility needs work - Bond attempt #2 for \$35 million



(nearly ½ the bond payment already built into the budget) on 11/2/17 fails 48% - 52%. Bond attempt #3 for \$29.5 Million on 3/6/18 fails 40% to 60%.

- d. FY19 another \$1 million put into facility (new camera system, PA System, door locks, etc.)
6. Lessons Learned
 - a. There is widespread agreement in the community that the Mt. Abe building needs work, also widespread agreement that the work is unaffordable
 - b. With three failed bond votes over 3.5 years it seems clear lack of affordability is the driving factor behind the failed attempts
7. Key Considerations
 - a. Construction costs escalate approximately 5% a year (4-7 depending on who you talk to). Economic growth (Consumer Price Index) is typically 1.5-3% a year. This means our ability to afford fixing the building grows further out of reach every year.
 - b. Reinstating the school construction aid would help taxpayers afford a bond to renovate Mt. Abe and could lead to a successful bond vote
8. The Challenge of Funding & A Proposal for Some Immediate Relief
 - a. Recognizing there isn't a money tree on the back lawn of the state house, securing funds for reinstating school construction aid may prove difficult
 - b. Consider providing some relief to school districts like MAUSD who have been able to build significant money into their general fund budgets for school construction services by making this money exempt from the spending threshold, as capital debt currently is
 - c. Like other districts around the state, not only is MAUSD struggling with the costs associated with aging buildings, we are also struggling to afford keeping the doors open to all of our schools while providing a robust education for our students as our student enrollment steadily drops along with our equalized pupil count. For FY21 a 1.45% increase in spending is raising the cost per equalized pupil by 4.7% putting us approximately \$10 per student under the spending threshold. In a community unlikely to support paying a penalty for exceeding the spending threshold our spending has become effectively fixed while our costs increase and our pupils decrease. This has led the MAUSD Board to engage in several community engagement events over the past several months to explore the future use of our schools, including the possible closure of multiple schools.
 - d. If money budgeted for school construction costs were exempt from the spending threshold, as capital debt currently is, this would at least buy some time for MAUSD to make long-term plans given our economic realities.
9. Thank you for your time this afternoon