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Senators of the Education Committee:

These remarks were first mailed to my two Senators from Windham County, Sen. Becca Balint and Sen. Jeanette White. I am thankful for this opportunity to address your concerns regarding a one year delay on forced mergers. I support a delay for communities that are struggling under the current situation.

I am writing to you with a plea, as well as a position. This is a call for help. The meetings I attend these days are really about hedging bets, taking a 'two-pronged' approach or simply trying to find a path that might work to follow the law and follow the will of the community.

Someone stood up at the soon to be postponed 'organizational meeting' at the Brattleboro High School gym on February 27 and asked a very poignant question: "How can we possibly move forward and build something together when we are not together?" Although the vote to postpone was a decisive 50-22, it has caused yet more anxiety and division as we approach the new meeting date of April 2.

As the citizen who made the motion to delay the meeting I was concerned that I had endangered my campaign for Brattleboro School Board by my action. The postponement was well covered in the news and yet I went on to win overwhelmingly against the sitting Brattleboro Town School Board chair. I only mention this as evidence of how people are still pulling whatever lever is available to gain some public control over a situation that has never gained public support. We need relief from you, our representatives in the Vermont Senate.

Public votes against the break up of our Supervisory Union began when Vernon was being forced to leave the SU to preserve their historically held school choice.

A vote passed in the Brattleboro Representative Town Meeting in March of 2015 read as follows:

"Brattleboro Town School District Resolution. Resolve that members of Brattleboro Representative Town Meeting do not support efforts by the Vermont State Legislature to empower the State Board of Education to determine the existence of the Brattleboro Town School District." The resolution was overwhelmingly adopted.

A vote passed in the Brattleboro Representative Town Meeting in March of 2017 read as follows:

"Whereas, special circumstances in some school districts in the Windham Southeast Supervisory Union have made it very difficult to craft an Act 46 merger agreement acceptable to all of the members school districts, and,

Whereas, under ACT 46 the Vermont State Board of Education is empowered to compel school districts to merger under terms and conditions under its sole control, and,

Whereas, Vermont has a long history of local control of education,

Now Therefore, Be It Resolved, that the Town Meeting Representatives of Brattleboro respectfully request that our State Senators and Representatives work with the Vermont Agency of Education and/or introduce legislation to insure that no merger under Act 46 will take place that affects any School District in the Windham Southeast Supervisory Union without affirmative action by the voters of the School District involved.

The motion was seconded, and after moderate discussion, on a division vote, the motion passed 721 in favor and 34 opposed.

And then in November of 2017 the proposed articles presented by our 'study committee' were voted down by a margin of over 2:1 in all four towns.

Why does merger have so little support?

- 1) the study committee avoided having a public engagement regarding Alternative Governance. "We already looked into that."
- 2) AGS was seen by many in the public as the way to preserve a successful five-town Supervisory Union (WSESU) that already collaborated and was clearly eager to do more collaboration.
- 3) the Act 46 law itself held up AGS as an option, especially when geographic isolation was an issue. Vernon is now geographically isolated by the forced merger.

I have not even mentioned the legal case against the VT-DOE. The public wants to let the legal issues play out. Short of that we will not "be together." People see that seven of the 20 some towns with schools in Windham County are party to the legal appeal. I would say that pressure to join the appeal is more ascendent than sentiment to go-along and get-along with the VT-DOE.

What will a one year delay do for our region? Number one it will allow the opportunity for us to "get together" before we build something new for our children, our families, teachers and communities. Second, it will allow enough time for the court to bring some of the much lauded "transparency" to bear on this process. Transparency was lacking during the study group phase. Our study group chose to spend discretionary funds for an attorney over a community facilitator. The study group got what they asked for: A lack of community support.

Earlier this year I was hired to call a contra dance for a community that was celebrating their merger. I was impressed by this and asked some of the local officials what had happened to bring these communities together to celebrate. The answer was revealing. We got together, we talked, we decided this was in the interest of both towns - so we merged.

Our towns have not had that experience.

The legislative process that created Act 46 was complicated and involved an interlocking set of goals, incentives, carrots and sticks, promises and processes. Yes, the Act passed, but it passed with many understandings that have not been honored. When components of a law are

inserted in legislation to gain political support and then those components are ignored in the implementation of the law then we undermine the integrity of the process. I know that some members of the Vermont legislature expected some form of "exit ramp" - even a temporary one - if the community was not ready for 'preferred' merger. Our community expected this. We expected it because it is in the law.

The delay bill - for ALL forced mergers - is an opportunity to bring integrity back into this process. And it is in the best interests of reaching the goals of Act 46. Until we begin to see the Act as a tool to help us fulfill community aspirations then we will not "be together." On the other hand, if people begin to see the full promise of the legislation in relation to Vermont values and traditions then we will have a path forward.

Those who say delay is "unfair" have overlooked the fact that the demands made on towns and communities with different challenges, histories and geographies was never "fair" to all. Some towns did not have to do anything. Some towns were rewarded for doing what was waiting to be done. Some towns did some hard work, compromised, and got some form of incentive for that. Yet other communities have worked hard and have not found the same solutions as the one being imposed by the VT-DOE.

We all want equity, affordability and transparency. We also want integrity in the process. We also need our communities to "be together" so we can build something new together. Please work out a delay bill with the Vermont House.

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Brattleboro Town Meeting Representative, District 3
Recently elected member of the Brattleboro Town School Board (not yet sworn in)