

I'm Herbert Ogden, Chair of the board of the Taconic & Green Regional School District, a unified union district that began to operate its five schools in 2018. I'm here not because any of our towns want to withdraw but because what could happen in our district shows that this bill is impractical. I speak only for myself, not for my board. The board has not discussed this bill.

Taconic & Green consists of nine towns, the smallest of which are my town of Mt. Tabor, with 210 people and 137 registered voters, and Landgrove, with 177 residents and probably even fewer registered voters than Mt. Tabor.

These numbers lead to my concern about allowing the withdrawal process to start with petition signed by only 5% of registered voters. In Mt. Tabor, that's seven voters. It's probably even less in Landgrove. In either town, one good sized family could start the process. Within 60 days, there would be a withdrawal study committee, a "subcommittee" of the board to be liaison with it, and the start of a process that would require the supt's participation not only in convening the committee but also almost certainly in the analysis that subsection c requires – all because seven people signed a petition. I was on the merger study committee for our district, I know it took a lot of work, and I don't think that amount of work should be required when a mere 5% of voters in one town sign a petition. This bill unreasonably allows seven people to tie up a lot of resources.

At the very least, there should be a budget requirement like the one in the merger statute, 16 V.S.A. § 706, and the petitioning town should have to fund the study. Much better would be a requirement that the petition would lead only to a vote in the town where the petitioners lived. Only if a majority in that town voted for withdrawal would the rest of the process go forward. Even in a small town, a majority of the electorate is a lot more than seven voters.

I realize the 5% may have been borrowed from the merger statute, section 706, which starts the merger process if 5% of the voters in two or more school districts petition for merger. The merger situation differs greatly from the withdrawal situation, however. Two tiny town school districts couldn't realistically start a merger because they wouldn't have nearly enough students to qualify under Act 46. At least one of the towns would have to be quite large. 5% of the voters in such a town probably would be well over one hundred people, not a mere 7.

Paradoxically, the bill both makes it too easy to start the full blown withdrawal process and too hard to end with a withdrawal. The analysis required by subsection c and the report required by subsection d are more detailed than the merger analysis required at the local level by 16 V.S.A. § 706b(b) and at the State Board level by 16 V.S.A. § 706c(b). Also, by retaining the requirement in the present 16 V.S.A. § 724 that a withdrawal must pass in every town in the district, the bill would let a minuscule part of the total district electorate in one tiny town thwart a withdrawal. For example, if Weston wanted to leave the Taconic and Green District, and every town but my town of Mt. Tabor voted in favor, and even if the turnout in Mt. Tabor were a relatively high 50%, namely 69 voters, withdrawal would fail if just 35 Mt. Tabor voters opposed it. Compare those 35 votes with the 2300 or so votes usually cast in a district election, and you may conclude there's a problem. Should less than 2% of the district electorate be able to prevent a withdrawal?

That's why I say the bill makes it too easy to start withdrawal and too hard to finish it. Thank you.