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In making sweeping changes to long standing law such as Title 16 Chapter 11 it is important to look comprehensively at how current law is working or not working and consider how changes to the law will impact the opportunity of citizens to participate in the process. This is why your committee's work can make an essential contribution to the changes being contemplated.

I am speaking specifically to the withdrawal section of the law section 22- 0275. Numerous towns in Vermont have used democratic processes to resolve issues related to Act 46. No community has made decisions lightly. They can't. Under current law, withdrawal or dissolution necessitates hours and hours of volunteer organizing, research, petitioning, and in-depth community deliberation about schooling and costs. Ultimately some towns continue toward withdrawal or dissolution, while others instead recommit to merger. The decision is made via the ballot box — twice — once in the town and again in the merged unit. These opportunities, built into current law are a healthy part of Vermont democracy.

An example are the towns of Bradford and Newbury. Your district Representative Hanza. Newbury and Bradford did not merge voluntarily.

Newbury citizens petitioned the merged board for changes to articles of agreement to address concerns re school closure and repurposing.

Changes to articles were made which reassured some Newbury residents.

Others remained dissatisfied with a forced merger.

Residents petitioned to withdraw and dissolve the merger.

The dissolution of the merger was unsuccessful at the ballot box.

Newbury and Bradford followed current law and reached an acceptable conclusion at the ballot box. Approx. 90% of merged districts have adjusted articles of agreement this way, reassuring voters and in many cases forging lasting compromises.

The proposed changes before you are intended to revise all this. Significantly towns have not asked for changes to current law, rather they have worked through what exists in statute for the most part effectively regardless of outcome. The changes have been requested by the State Board of Education, a politically appointed body whose chair Oliver Olsen has testified " We don't want another Ripton" referring to one town and the outcome it reached.

As you review the changes, please note the revisions contain 10 new requirements beyond current law and requires at least 760 extra days (over two years) to complete. A number of new steps have no time limit, meaning that an indefinite delay could occur if the entities required to act do not favor a withdrawal and choose not to act in a timely way. The revisions

include the requirement that the withdrawing town find a union board to provide supervisory services, a significant final task in the process. Current law assigns the State Board of Education to this task rather than leaving it to dissatisfied partners to resolve. Section 6A requires a supermajority vote of 60% to withdraw over State Board disapproval when a supermajority was not required to form a merger in the 1<sup>st</sup> place and gives an appointed board the right to dismiss a vote of the majority of the electorate. The changes effectively disenfranchise Starksboro who initiated the process in March and will vote on withdrawal in May. The bill will retroactively void a vote properly conducted in accordance with the law at the time of the vote. In sum the changes appear to be an attempt to suppress the right of Vermonters to vote on withdrawal issues by making withdrawal virtually impossible. They do not facilitate the process; they create a minefield to navigate.

To date just 5 towns have chosen to withdraw and completed the task - Readsboro, Halifax, Westminster, Athens, Grafton. A number of towns are in process - Ripton, Lincoln, Stowe, Starksboro and a much great number have chosen to remain merged among them Newbury, and Bradford. Those who have chosen to remain merged have through the process reached compromises such as the adjusted articles created by Newbury and Bradford. Which should serve them well.

Oliver Olsen's words "We don't want another Ripton" Are significant because we should. . Places that can't figure this out need a recourse that's timely and feasible to work through. These sweeping changes to long standing Vermont law shift power away from the electorate to an appointed board. One size won't fit all — that's why local democratic engagement is so crucial to identifying solutions. We need to trust that the democratic process will work not rig the process because we don't like the outcome.

The role of the state should be to set and maintain standards on educational quality, equity, value and other key priorities. It should be to support, democratic engagement, not thwart the wishes of the electorate. At a time when citizens' faith in democracy is on the ropes, please take the time needed to carefully deliberate these changes.

Thank you for your time.

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