

Act 46 Study Committee
Approved Minutes for March 23, 2016
Harwood Union High School Library

Act 46 Study Committee Members Present: Jill Ellis (Fayston), Rosemarie White (Harwood ex-officio), Garrett MacCurtain (Harwood ex-officio), Gabe Gilman (Moretown), Christine Sullivan (Waitsfield), Jen Watkins (alternate for Warren), Alex Thomsen (W-D for Waterbury), Jason Gibbs (W-D for Waterbury)

Other Board Members Present: Marie Schmukal (Warren), Matt Staples (Warren), Reed MacCracken (Waterbury-Duxbury)

WWSU Administrators: Brigid Nease, Michelle Baker

Consultants: Walter Nardelli, Jeff Mahre

Other: Channel 44 camera person, Dale Smeltzer

- 1) **Call to Order:** Gabe Gilman, chair of the Study Committee, called the meeting to order at 5:43 p.m.
- 2) **Confirming Agenda:** There were no amendments to the agenda.
- 3) **Approval of Minutes:**
 - i) **STUDY COMMITTEE ACTION:** Jill Ellis moved to approve the minutes of March 9, 2016 as written. Christine Sullivan seconded the motion which passed unanimously.
- 4) **Update Articles based on new information:** Christine Sullivan reviewed the suggested changes to the Articles of Agreement, based on recent attorney and Agency of Education comments.
 - a) Article 1 had minor wording changes, referring now to "Town" school districts.
 - b) Article 3 had minor changes.
 - c) Article 5 have proposed new sections D and E. The attorney has signed off on the wording for section D, but has yet to review section E.
 - i) Section D: This deals with indebtedness relating to Warren, to allow them the flexibility to make required changes to their building but keep the amounts for indebtedness for a new unified district within a known amount. The wording would also allow Warren voters to decide to bond for a greater amount and pay for it with only Warren voters (as happened with Duxbury when it formed the union with Waterbury). Jen Watkins noted that the amount needed for "required" was not clearly presented by their architect, and that the Warren board is now considering a bond of \$3.7 million to fix the basic items, with \$5.1 million as the amount to also make some structural changes that might be presented as a separate article to voters. She questioned whether holding Warren to \$1.8 was fair considering the bonded indebtedness of other districts. Matt Staples noted that there has been no spending on the school building for many years. Hence they at Warren think that the amount of \$1.8 in section D is too low. Michelle Baker provided a handout titled "Evaluation of Proposed Warren Debt for Capital Improvements" dated March 23, 2016. Gabe noted that the wording needs to strike a balance with the concerns of some other towns who have concerns about spending too much before the unified district is formed. Brigid noted that the legislature is trying to clarify issues like this, and that it is clear that a study committee does not have the authority to prevent new bonding, but that it does have the authority to limit the dollar amount. Brigid noted that what is in question is what it "necessary". Rosemarie noted that she is hearing many concerns about costs from Warren voters, and thinks that it will be important to keep the bond amount limited to the "necessary" for now in order to gain support in the town, and also within the towns considering going into the unified district. Brigid reminded board members about the incentives that would happen only with an accelerated merger, and that a compromise is important.

Christine suggested a possible compromise of assigning a per pupil spending amount at Warren that was equivalent to the other Valley schools, and backing into a bond amount that would fill the

differential between Warren's current lower cost per pupil and these other schools and create equity that way. Michelle calculated this bond amount (calculated from the amount added to Warren's per pupil spending to bring it up to the average of the other Valley towns) to be at \$2.55 million, which would bring Warren to \$15,500/equalized pupil. Jen and Matt thought this would be a fair compromise for Warren. Other towns' board members thought this had logic as well, and that they could explain this to their voters who have concerns about the cost of a Warren bond, pointing out that another advantage is that the amount of bonded indebtedness would be fixed. Gabe noted that the equity logic would be one the state Agency of Education will be looking for as well.

ii) Section E (dealing with budget deficits) - There was question from board members about whether this was needed, and whether we could operate on trust.

iii) **STUDY COMMITTEE ACTION:** Christine Sullivan moved to approve Section D in this Article with an amount of \$2.55 million, and to strike Section E. Alex Thomsen seconded the motion which passed unanimously.

d) Article 6 - only change is adding a title.

e) Article 8 had terminology modified to refer to "town" school district annual meetings.

f) Article 13 added clarifying wording about "applicable legal requirements".

g) Article 15 had wording in the last sentence modified to clarify how board members would vote regarding the specific grades of students they represent, if in a modified union because not all towns approve the merger.

h) **STUDY COMMITTEE ACTION:** Alex Thomsen moved to approve the Articles of Agreement as modified at this meeting. Jill Ellis seconded the motion which passed unanimously.

5) **Review and Share Individual Town Story Cards:**

a) Jill reported that the Fayston story card approach is a summary statement to begin with, giving process and why, meaning, impact on taxes, benefits, addressing concerns

b) Alex reported that Waterbury-Duxbury's ideas were: overall purpose, financial reasons, quality reasons, answers to questions that would come up. They are looking at paying to have this info printed out, and have it inserted in the Waterbury Record.

c) Warren: Jen said they are thinking of a different format, with a summary of financial impacts first, then list of advantages and disadvantages for Warren.

d) Harwood: Garrett reported that they would cover benefits, as their board has only seen benefits.

e) Waitsfield - Christine displayed the draft of what is being planned for their town.

f) Moretown - Gabe reported that their board will be finalizing theirs tomorrow night. He noted that stability will be one big benefit of a merged district; protection from sudden shocks. Also a unified board will bring more transparency over the current layers of decision making that happen with our smaller districts and the reality of local control being rather complex due to these layers.

g) It was agreed that everyone will send their story cards to Gabe and Christine, who will develop standard formatting but not deal with content. The story cards should be sent to them using the study committee email address so that they go to Brigid as well. Gabe will then put them on a google drive that will be shared with all committee members. Due date for sending in was set as Tuesday March 29, but sooner is better. Final cards, all revisions made, will be due at the April 13, 2016 meeting, so that they can be published before the forum on April 27.

6) **Plan the WWSU Board Meeting for March 31 – Reorganization and Act 46:** This meeting/public forum is next Thursday, and be the reorganization of WWSU Board, then a public forum held in the Harwood library.

a) **Forum Presentation:**

i) Core of argument and reasons to vote yes, and brief overview, presented by Gabe

ii) Bullet points of the important aspects of Articles of Agreement, presented by Christine

- iii) Brigid and Michelle develop handout to give out AFTER THE PRESENTATIONS BUT BEFORE Q&A, containing basic, general info, with links to website info and very basic financial info (not town specific yet), perhaps savings over the whole district for taxpayers.
 - iv) Then time for Q&A.
 - v) Moderator? Perhaps Jason serving in this role.
 - vi) Plan on certain time to end and then the committee meeting afterwards to review the forum result and how to learn from it. Perhaps also have time for people to ask questions less formally after the meeting, one on one. Look at this as a model template for all forums.
- 7) **Communication Plan; Advertising:** Brigid presented a calendar of upcoming meetings and forums, plus dates relating to the vote (including submitting petitions to be a board member). What has been decided is: four forums, story cards, optional extra forums held by local boards. She reported that notifications about forums will go out 2 days before on Blackboard Connect reminder; and they are mentioned in her op-Ed coming out this week. She asked for more clarity about how information will be sent out to voters. There was then discussion about the possibilities. Ideas suggested were:
- a) Mailers, Flyers - insert in Waterbury Record, Valley Reporter, \$300 to put insert in Waterbury Record plus costs of printing the paper insert (can be done at school)
 - b) 70 cents a postcard, 8.5 by 5, full color, 10,000 voters, \$7,000 to mail
 - c) Digital postcard would be \$100 per 1,000; email would be based on aggregated consumer data, high bounce back rate; not agreement that the cost would be worth it
 - d) Signs are another possibility; cost unknown
- There was general agreement that a flyer in the two weekly papers is the best way to get out info, besides digital and school newsletter lists that we already have.
- 8) **Other Business** – Brigid reminded board members that there needs to be a public hearing in each of the six towns, within 10 days of the vote. Dates were tentatively assigned for these hearings.
- 9) **Next Meeting** - Mar 31 meeting - make a list of everything that needs to happen before vote.
- 10) **Adjournment of Study Committee:** Gabe Gilman moved to adjourn the Study Committee meeting at 9:33 p.m. Alex Thomsen seconded the motion which passed unanimously.

Minutes recorded by Dale Smeltzer