

TEMPORARY REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT STUDY COMMITTEE  
SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES  
February 23, 2022

1) Call to Order: The Temporary Regional School District Study Committee meeting held at the Warren School and via teleconference was called to order at 6:03 p.m. by William Davenport.

Members present: William Davenport, Co-Chairman, Stephen Tracy, Co-Chairman, Margaret Hunt, Secretary, Michael Bergin, Treasurer, Jill Johnson, Robert DeLayo, Billie Jean Sideris, and Lynn Stone. Also present: Christopher Leone, Superintendent, and Matthew Venhorst, CSDE.

2) Approval of Minutes (from January 19, 2022)

Mr. Bergin made a motion to approve the minutes from January 19, 2022. Mrs. Sideris seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

3) Public Comment

Denise Raap, First Selectman Town of Litchfield, wanted to clarify some inaccurate misrepresentation of the Board of Selectmen. The Board of Selectmen fully endorses this merger. The recent article in the paper cast doubt. Selectmen are asking questions in preparation for public presentations and want to be equipped to address questions from the community. Ms. Raap closed by saying she wants everyone to know the entire board is prepared to move forward with whatever this group recommends.

Jeff Zullo, a member of the Board of Selectman from Litchfield, seconds Denise's comments and believes everyone on the Board strongly supports this committee's work. Mr. Zullo went on to say some of the recent commentary reflects the Board's concern that all the analysis is clear and precise. Mr. Zullo used Chris Leone's analysis as the basis for conducting his own analysis of Litchfield's existing budget and the Region 20 budget and commented the \$2.5 million first year savings is clear though the percentage of savings for Litchfield is the lowest and the lowest on a per capita basis, too. With that said, the committee needs to have a good clear message to make the case to Litchfield voters that argues the benefits of this work despite the lower savings. Mr. Zullo commented there has been some discussion to see if Litchfield could add an additional Board of Education member or two to provide better representation for Litchfield given it has a significantly larger population and contribution to Region 20 than the other three towns combined. He realizes that there would be no change in the statutory weighting of the vote, but it would bring more Litchfield voices to the table. This is something the committee needs to consider to make the savings differentials palatable to all districts and make everyone feel they are getting equivalent representation.

Jim Stedronsky, senior member of the Board of Finance from the Town of Litchfield, wanted to second Denise Rapp and Jeff Zullo comments and added he thanks both Boards of Education on what they have done so far in bringing savings through cooperation. Mr. Stedronsky believes Litchfield has realized all the savings through cooperation and is thinking with good attorneys, that Litchfield Public Schools and Region 6 could form one high school but not through regionalization. If regionalization fails through the referendum vote, he believes there could still be a consolidation of one high school.

Mr. Stedronsky went onto to say he is concerned, as a member of the Board of Finance, that with \$2.5 million in operational savings Litchfield gets 1%, effectively nothing. Mr. Stedronsky commented Mr. Zullo was good enough to calculate this information. The town of Warren will enjoy \$436 per capita savings, Morris \$322 per capita savings, Goshen \$ 318 per capita savings and Litchfield \$26.58. With Litchfield, representing the borough of Litchfield, borough of Bantam, the town of Litchfield and Northfield, who has 55% of the population and over half of the operation expenses and with the committee giving 25% of the seats on the Board of Education is “a slap in the face to Litchfield, it’s a slap in the face, it’s an affront to Litchfield.” Boards act by gaining consensus and what is important are seats at the table and Litchfield deserves more seats at the table. Mr. Stedronsky cannot see how Litchfield can support a regional board where Warren will have six times per capita savings and Litchfield will pay six times the amount of operations expense. Mr. Stedronsky urges the members of this committee and particularly the Litchfield members of the committee to stand up for Litchfield and be advocates for Litchfield with a 6, 3, 3, 3 Board configuration; to have a fair board and fair representation that all of us can go forward and all of us can support.

Julia Hrica, from the Town of Litchfield commented, she lives in Litchfield, grew up in Litchfield, graduated from Litchfield High School and would like to address the concern of Board representation. Ms. Hrica was on the original committee and the committee believed with three Board member representations from each town, that these members would all be there for the same goal, reason and purpose; to come together and do something positive for the children. And, the weighted voting is a safety net. Ms. Hrica added, she believes that arguing whether Litchfield has more power or the other towns have more power will be the downfall of this proposal. Litchfield needs to look at what we gain from this merger and not what we lose. Litchfield gains a better education for our students. Because Litchfield doesn’t have enough student body we are eliminating classes as we speak. As adults, we need to do what is best for the children in town. If we don’t do this, student opportunities will dwindle academically, extra circularly, and athletically. The students will all get lost and we as adults need to take our egos out of this and we need to think of the children. As a taxpayer, if Ms. Hrica saves less money than Warren, she is still saving money. Ms. Hrica closed by saying she committed to living in Litchfield and supporting the school system and adults need to take their egos out of this, please.

Pat Dauten from Litchfield Board of Finance commented she has listened to many, many, many hours of what is right and what is wrong financially with the merger. Ms. Dauten said she has personally decided it is the best to bring this all together. This may not sound right in the beginning but it will be in the end. Ms. Dauten had kids go through the Litchfield school system and this merger would make it even better. It would be the best thing to do and Ms. Dauten has thought about this for a 100 hours and believes this is what is best and this would be the best.

#### 4) Superintendent Update

Mr. Leone opened this portion of the meeting commenting the committee would be tabling the Appraisals & Assessment Language as we are awaiting final language on this portion of the report. Also, there will not be a vote on the approval of the final report (Item 5b.).

##### a. Governance Language

Mr. Leone presented the R20 Governance – Overview presentation that included the current Board of Education structure, the R20 Proposed Structure and alternate to the proposed R20

Structure whereby LPS adds a 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> BOE member. This presentation was generated to address the concern of Litchfield contributing 55% of the operating expenses and needing to have more seats at the table/more Board representation. When comparing the current structure, Litchfield's per member vote is 11.11%. With the R20 Proposed Structure, Litchfield's per member vote is 18.71%. By adding one or two additional Litchfield members to the R20 Board of Education reduces the per member vote to 14.03% and 11.22% respectively. Mr. Leone added a regional school district budget is passed by popular vote. Using 2020 Census Population data, Litchfield has 54.80% of the vote, over two times greater than the Goshen, three times greater than Morris and five times greater than Warren.

Ms. Hunt commented as a committee, she would love to hear people's thoughts on the public comments and the notion of trying to make this palatable to all the communities to the extent of the bigger voting block. Are committee members happy with the 3 3, 3, representation? Do you think we need to add more voice or change the weighted to vote?

Ms. Stone, representing the Litchfield Board of Education as a committee member commented she has been a Litchfield BOE member for seven years is perfectly fine with the 3,3,3, as a Board member you have control in other places. The most important decision is the Superintendent. Ms. Stone commented, she doesn't care about the power. It is an antiquated idea. Need to move forward. I know the first committee put blood, sweat and tears into this. The second committee put blood sweat and tears into this trying to come to a consensus. Ms. Stone has heard a couple of voices in the community that are not supportive and it's about power and control. We need what is best for our kids and provide them with a viable education. If this merger just does not go through, in five years Litchfield is going to have to determine what programs they are going to cut. Ms. Stone is fine with 3, 3, 3, and doesn't want the committee to forget about why they are here – for education. Ms. Stone supports both the first and second committees' recommendations.

Mr. Bergin, a Goshen resident representing the Regional 6 Board of Education on this committee commented Goshen has the popular majority vote on the Region 6 Board. Mr. Bergin went on to say we don't sit as three different towns; we sit as one committee and we get the job done. It is not about towns; it's about getting the job done. And since Mr. Bergin has sat on the Board, it has never come up on who is from a small town versus a larger town. It is always about what is best for the education of the children. Mr. Bergin echoed that a lot of blood, sweat, and tears went into this work, and the first committee carried the majority of the weight. Mr. Bergin said they got it right. Mr. Bergin supports the 3, 3, 3 R20 Board structure.

Mrs. Sideris, representing the town of Morris commented she was on the first committee as well and a resident of Morris for about 15 years and previously sat on the BOE for Morris on R6. The three members don't make a difference. Whether three members or four members the percentage of the vote is unchanged you only get so much of 100. To me to add more voice and give each vote less weight doesn't make sense to me. If anything, it feels like an intimidation factor and the bigger town wants everything and everyone else to know they are the bigger town. As a voter of one of the small towns of the four towns it doesn't feel good.

Mrs. Johnson, representing the town of Litchfield on this committee commented she had been a member of the Board of Education for Region 6 representing the town of Goshen before moving back to Litchfield. And Mr. Bergin is correct that you are there for the education of the children. At the end of the day, adding additional board members would not be helpful and may be ineffective to have a board that large; we need to give up the idea that we are four individual towns and know we are here for Region 20.

Mr. Tracy, town of Warren commented this reminds him of a Connecticut Compromise in that the larger town has the weighted majority but the smaller towns can take some comfort in that each member town has to have one positive member vote in order to pass something. Mr. Tracy believes it provides the balance for all four towns.

The R20 Governance – Overview presentation can be found on the district website under Temporary Regional Committee – Work Products.

b. Appraisals & Assessment Language

Tabling this agenda item for the next meeting.

c. Debt Language

Mr. Leone gave the Financial Overview presentation commenting that it includes the Concept Budget of November 2021 and consideration when developing the budget. It addresses questions that arose from the original November 2021 budget submission and reconfigures the budget that includes Region 20 absorbing the school debt for both districts. Additionally, the slide deck includes a 7-year budget projection per town with no regionalization with a 2%, 3%, and 4% escalator. Mr. Leone closed the presentation with a review of Education Cost Sharing payments from the state, and notes on other factors that can impact the budget such as inflation and revaluation. Mr. Leone addressed questions from the committee.

Ms Sideris said that she was concerned that regional debt would become a concern for the taxpayers. Mr. Leone replied that debt service is currently being kept reasonable. Mr. Tracy inquired about a change in debt language whereby in the original report both districts would be responsible for their debt prior to the formation of Region 20. The revised debt language has Region 20 absorbing the school debt for the town of Litchfield and Region 6. Mr. Bergin said that he would like the new region to be free and clear of debt. Discussion ensued

Ms. Hunt made a motion to delete the previous debt language and replace it with the new language that Region 20 would assume the school debt of the town of Litchfield and Region 6. Mr. Bergin seconded the motion. The motion passes unanimously.

5) Action Items

a. Discussion – Final Report of the Temporary Regional School District Study Committee  
Mr. Leone took note of the committee member's edits and revisions to the final report.

b. Approval – Final Report of the Temporary Regional School District Study Committee  
Mr. Tracy made a motion to postpone Item 5b. to the next meeting pending legal advice on facilities. Mr. Bergin seconded the motion. The motion passes unanimously.

6) Public Comment

Julia Hrica of Litchfield commented on the importance of informing the community about regionalization to dispel inaccurate information or rumors. Ms. Hrica said with this process, we are in control of what district Litchfield partners with. If this referendum fails to pass, keep in mind the State's plan on redistricting. Litchfield would be paired with Housatonic and Goshen would be redistricted with Torrington.

Jeff Zullo from the town of Litchfield commented he agreed with Ms. Hrica that the messaging of this process is critical in order to get this passed. Mr. Zullo also offered a point of clarification having been on the building renovation committee of the Intermediate School and the high school stating the bonds come off in 2026 and 2027. Mr. Leone commented the *town* bonds come off in 2026 and 2027 but the obligation from receiving state funding begins once the project closes and will go beyond those dates. Mr. Zullo also expressed his concern as a taxpayer and citizen about low building utilization of Litchfield Intermediate School at 30% while having to heat and run electricity and the building at 100%. Mr. Zullo has a concern about the low utilization of the high school. Running buildings with such low utilization rates can be a burden on taxpayers and on the new region.

Denise Raap of Litchfield wanted to thank Julia Hrica for her thoughtful comments and wholeheartedly believes that at the end of the day it comes down to what is best for the students. Ms. Raap went on to say the Selectmen will do their best to make sure towns are the most attractive to attract families and increase enrollment. Ms. Rapp closed by thanking the committee for all their work.

7) Next Steps

Next steps include acquiring the legal feedback on facilities and incorporating the language into the final report. Mr. Leone also requested committee members send final report edits and comments to him within the next week.

8) Next Meeting

The next meeting will be scheduled as possible for March 11, 2022, at 6:00 p.m. at Wamogo in the auditorium.

Before adjourning Mr. Davenport requested at the next meeting each committee member be prepared to comment on the final proposal.

9) Adjournment There being no further business to come before this committee, **Mr. Bergin made a motion to adjourn. Ms. Stone seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.** The meeting adjourned at 7:24 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,  
Christine Escobar  
Secretary, pro-tem