

TEMPORARY REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT STUDY COMMITTEE
SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES
March 11, 2022

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

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

2) Approval of Minutes (from February 23, 2022)

Jill Johnson made a motion to approve the minutes from February 23, 2022. Lynn Stone seconded the motion. John Morosani abstained. The motion passes 8 yes, 0 no, 1 abstention.

3) Public Comment

Julia Hrica from the town of Litchfield read a statement sharing she was a member of the committee that was formed more than a year ago to look at the potential merger of Region 6 and Litchfield Public Schools. Ms. Hrica has been a lifelong resident of Litchfield, a graduate of Litchfield High School, and a parent of two Litchfield High School graduates. She commented there has been much press about the perceived inequities about the reduction of taxes, representation on the Board, a plan concocted by WAMOGO, and the Region 6 towns have had a strong influence with regards to the design of the proposed education and school merger plan. Ms. Hrica commented she can speak about these concerns as a member of the last committee. She said there are potential savings for merging the two districts and as Chris (Leone) pointed out, the leaders of each town have the option to pass on the savings to the taxpayers or apply those savings to other projects in their towns. Ms. Hrica would be pleased with savings of any amount, and it would be a bonus for her personally or for her town. She explained as far as the future Board of Education members and their voting powers are concerned, the last committee began to look at the number of Board of Ed members and their voting power. Chris (Leone) informed us of the regulations controlled by the State Board of Education regarding Regional School Districts. The previous committee based their recommendations on those regulations and as well as keeping in mind equity for all of the towns involved. An equal number of members with state-mandated weighted voting, a supermajority of affirmative votes, and that each town would have at least one affirmative vote to make any changes would prevent any single town from having control over any other town. This remains the same. That seemed fair and reasonable to the previous committee. Most importantly, they strongly believed that anyone running for and elected to the new Board of Education would have one goal in mind-the best educational opportunities for the children of Region 20, not adult or town power. It is up to us as the voters to see that those elected to the Board of Education do have those values in their hearts and minds. On this committee, there is an equal number of members representing Litchfield Public Schools and Region 6. No one is leading anyone around by the nose. No one is bullying anyone. Everyone has the right to express their opinion and to be heard. It is very much a collaborative effort. When all is said and done the proposal that this committee sends to the State Board of Ed will be one they can all be proud of; that we can all be proud of, one that will afford the children of our towns so many wonderful opportunities academically, athletically, and for their extra-curricular activities. From a business standpoint, should we be concerned about a few dollars, a vote or two, or should we be looking at this opportunity as a long-term

investment in the future of our towns and their citizens. Ms. Hrica thanked everyone for listening.

Stephen Tracy commented, Ms. Hrica has been a faithful attendee at every meeting, and he thanked her for her interest.

Emily Cole from the town of Goshen thanked the current and past committee for all the hard work, long hours, and dedication to the task. This is very exciting that we will soon have the opportunity to vote on something that has the potential to change our children's lives for the better and shape the future of our four towns. Not only will everyone benefit from the financial savings, but we will also be combining the best of both of our worlds to create something even bigger and stronger than any of the districts around us. The most impressive part of this proposal is what will be offered to our students. It will create a greater passion for education through unique classes, more challenging courses, greater Special Education support, and countless extra-curricular opportunities for students to better themselves. Ms. Cole's hope is when voters read through this lengthy document that they focus on the few slides that do benefit a student's life. Her hope is they don't get caught up on who will save more or how many votes their town gets. The voters should be focusing on what is best for a student's well-rounded education and what we can offer to help navigate those adolescent years. This is a unique opportunity to give local children an educational experience that most can only get through a private school. Ms. Cole is a member of the Board of Education and believes this is being done at the right time, with the right administrative team leading us through these uncharted waters. But more importantly, as an educator and a parent of students in both elementary and high school, Ms. Cole would love to see this pass and watch our towns work together for the greater good. Ms. Cole thanked everyone again and knows none of the committee members have taken this lightly and the committee's hard work has not gone unnoticed.

Mr. Tracey commented, Emily Cole is the one who encouraged him to volunteer as a committee member and he thanked her for being here at the end.

Carol Murphy from the town of Litchfield commented she has spent all her summers as a kid in Goshen at Tyler Lake and is also a 1970 graduate of Litchfield High School. Ms. Murphy had a good education back then and unfortunately given constraints, has some problems now. Ms. Murphy is so very much in favor of this combination merger and thinks it will benefit everyone; our kids, they are the most important and that is the way we should look at it always. Other people have said, there are taxpayer benefits and that is wonderful and a plus but cannot and does not see any downside. Ms. Murphy appreciates everything the committee has done, all the work put into this and a lot of other people are as well even though the committee may not hear it.

Caroline Wilcox Ugurlu from the town of Litchfield has two children in the school system. Ms. Wilcox Ugurlu works at the library and volunteers a lot around town. Ms. Wilcox Ugurlu served on the original committee looking into the merger and echoes what has just been said; she sees no downside at all to the merger of the school districts. There are only positives for our children and that is the most important thing to keep Litchfield vibrant and growing, to make sure the kids want to come back to Litchfield and businesses will want to stay here. Ms. Wilcox Ugurlu looks at the merger from a social-emotional standpoint. Right now, kids are really in crisis all over the

country. They have had their childhoods interrupted. There is too much pressure, too much screen time and it is a tough time to grow up. Bringing together new children for students to interact with will benefit them social-emotionally. When you put the kids together, familiarity is what bonds kids, whether there is a good relationship or not, this is what bonds kids. If students have more opportunities to be with more kids it is going to be much better, particularly in this fraught time we are living in. Ms. Wilcox Urgulu is pro-merger.

Ted Murphy from the town of Litchfield thanked the committee for the opportunity to speak and their hard work. He commented he and his sister spent summers in Goshen and winters in Litchfield. Mr. Murphy has been trying to do this (merger) for years but the committees have never gotten this far. One of Mr. Murphy's associates Jim Eisenhaure, who was also a dear friend took on this task in 1990 to try to get the First Selectman in each town to support this and that was a tough sell. Since his youth, Mr. Murphy would ask his dad why he couldn't go to school with his Goshen friends in the wintertime. His father would say "it's a long story." Now, as an adult, Mr. Murphy found out the real story. He went on to say this is not about us, it is about the kids, it is about better education. Mr. Murphy doesn't care what the naysayers say, schools today are roughly half the size than when he graduated in 1970. This merger will provide more opportunities for the kids and better education. Another benefit is that the merger may cause the towns to become more homogenous. The parents in one town will know the parents in the other towns. Mr. Murphy helped start the Litchfield Rowing Club in 1980 and started one of the first cooperative programs between the two schools. Both programs are still alive today. The committee is on the precipice and this is the time to do this. It has never gotten this close before. It is a historic time and he will work hard to get everyone who is a naysayer to see his view on this; it's a win-win-win. Mr. Murphy will do whatever he can do to help support this plan.

Mr. Tracy thanked and was very appreciative of everyone who took the time to come up and speak out.

4) Superintendent Update

a. Language Update

Chris Leone opened by publicly thanking Matt Venhorst, CSDE, and the legal team, Chris Chinni and Fred Dorsey for their support with this work. Mr. Leone then proceeded to review the meeting version (3.11.2022) report and noted and highlighted substantial changes since the committee last met. Mr. Leone responded to questions he received before the meeting and addressed additional questions from the committee members.

Of note, per C.G.S. Sec. 10-39, this is the Temporary Regional School Study Committee or acronym TRSSC.

Mr. Leone responded to a question regarding minority political party representation. He cited the Office of Legal Research (OLR) dated January 27, 2005, whereby the law establishing the election process for regional Boards of Education specifically exempts them from complying with minority political party representation requirements.

Another question raised was on the election date. Mr. Leone read by law the town can elect its regional board members in one of two ways. (1) During a town meeting held at least 30 days prior to the current member(s) term expiration or (2) during its regular municipal election on either the first Monday of May or the Tuesday after the first Monday of November biennially in odd number years. It does not change local voting practices.

Mr. Leone was asked about staggered Board of Education terms. Terms will have to be staggered, as it is part of the legislation. The Towns are going to have to work to replace people but you can't have more than half of your Board up for election every year.

In addition to addressing formatting, grammatical edits, and replacing verbiage of "shall" versus "will," Mr. Leone responded to a clarifying question on inventory and itemization of all assets before the formation of the new district. He commented the IT departments have most technology itemized, and big assets items are part of a depreciation schedule for the annual audit. The inventory and itemization will mostly be a matter of combining it all together.

5) Committee Member Comments on Proposed Report

Mike Bergin thanked Chris (Leone) and the staff for all the work they put into this and the previous Board members for their time and effort. He urged his fellow committee members to approve this and truly believes at the end of the day this is going to give a better educational experience to our children in all four towns. Mr. Bergin wholeheartedly believes this is a good proposal and everyone should fully support this.

John Morosani, in addition to echoing what Mike (Bergin) said, the five people that spoke tonight said it so well that this is about the educational opportunity afforded to the children of our communities. As a member of the Board of Education in Litchfield, not only will the students in Litchfield benefit but for all students in these four towns. That is what we must focus on, and we need to look forward to. Mr. Morosani echoed Mike's comments about the work of Chris Leone and Christine Escobar and all the other people who got us here today; we didn't get here all on our own, that is for sure.

Jill Johnson echoed both Mike and John's sentiments and added this has been an incredible worthy experience working with the committee and acknowledging much work was done before with the previous committee. Ms. Johnson acknowledged Julia (Hrica) saying, "I can't thank you enough for the work you put in and you have been a fierce advocate, here at every meeting. You are so appreciated for your passion." It is going to be the passion of all of us working together to get the word out, to make sure the truth is coming out. That people will understand exactly what is happening. Ms. Johnson has been stopped in her driveway and the grocery store by people asking clarifying questions. People really want to know and really want to understand. This is not just about Litchfield. It is not about Goshen, Warren, or Morris. It is about Region 20. It is about our kids. It is about what is best for our kids moving forward. Ms. Johnson won't have children in Region 20 and is really sad about that but will have grandchildren and their children after that in the district. Ms. Johnson is excited about Region 20. This is so long overdue, and we just had Ted Murphy speaking about this when it started back in the 80s. Ms. Johnson has had family members who have been on the Board of Education, Board of Selectmen, and the Board of Finance for generations and this is a very exciting time. Ms. Johnson closed by acknowledging the amount of work Chris (Leone) and his entire staff. This is

so amazing to bring us to this point and we need to be here.

Margaret Hunt commented being on this committee has been a great eye-opener for her. To see what the state requires and have Chris (Leone) able to interpret for us the differences between running a Regional and a Town District. In addition, Ms. Hunt has learned an awful lot and really appreciated being voted on to the committee by the town. Ms. Hunt is excited to go out and has already started clarifying things when approached with questions. That is going to be the next huge, important job.

Billie Jean Sideris supports the document as written. It is a long time coming just getting this to the voters. It is time to turn this back to the Boards of Education and let them get it out and get the vote. The documents have been worked and reworked and worked again and I think it's done.

Rob DeLayo was on the original committee and commented there are a few changes that occurred from the original report and he supports them. Mr. DeLayo finds it disappointing that there have been past public comments of "I support this but..." It is time for those people to support this and forget about the "buts" and will leave it at that.

Lynn Stone supports the document 110%. Ms. Stone appreciates Julia (Hrica) coming to every meeting and doing the initial work as a lot of this work was done by the first committee. We just re-endorsed their work. Ms. Stone thanks Chris (Leone) and his whole team for getting us together and getting us this far. It has been a lot of work and a lot of evenings out. Thank you to everyone, for everything they did to get us to this point.

At this time, Mr. Leone commented to offer thanks to all because you show up, all the time, and you are going to have the last word. This was brought forward as an idea, three years ago. That idea will now give people the opportunity to get it to the polls after 70 years. Ted (Murphy) referenced Jim Eisenhaure earlier in the evening. We (the committee) sit in the Jim Eisenhaure auditorium. If you read some of the work in the appendix, that was his work, the work of a visionary long before there was a vision. Mr. Leone wants to ensure the record notes the appreciation from the districts for you all. Mr. Leone also acknowledged Julia Hrica who has been here the whole time and referenced her t-shirt that says *It Takes All of Us*. Mr. Leone closed with, "Yes, it does take all of us."

Bill Davenport is excited the committee is at this point, finally. A lot of people have commented this is decades overdue. The public comments earlier in the meeting demonstrated what is needed next, the cheerleaders. Everything said, is what people must hear that loud and clear and understand it is all about the kids. The fact that we are here and can give it to the voters in all four towns is just awesome, increasing educational opportunities and saving money; you can't get any better than that. Mr. Davenport was reminded when he was a member of the State Board of Education and was speaking to the Commission at the time. They were talking about enrollment and how towns could regionalize. Looking at a map of Connecticut, Mr. Davenport pointed out the location of Litchfield, Goshen, Morris, and Warren. He stated, there are two high schools a mile and a half apart and they are two districts –why is that? And then they started

looking at other towns, the small pockets. Mr. Davenport said to the committee, I promise you, any of those towns would like to be in our shoes right now. We are so close to doing this and the districts are so close physically that we can do it instead of driving 7 miles to the next place. Mr. Davenport commented he doesn't know how Mr. Leone has done all this work, including running two school districts. He thanked Mr. Leone and all the committee members for their work and time. He is excited to get this to the voters for our kids.

Mr. Tracy took a moment to acknowledge the two Selectmen in attendance at this meeting: Denise Raap, First Selectmen of Litchfield online, and Todd Carusillo, First Selectman of Goshen in the auditorium.

Stephen Tracy echoed Bill Davenport's thank you to the members of the committee for the time, their insight, the caring devotion to this enterprise over the prior months. Members have all been faithful in showing up and contributing in a positive way. Mr. Tracy said it is not often we get to do something that is a win-win. And that is what we have before us tonight. A win for our kids in terms of an opportunity, and a win for our taxpayers in terms of fiscal responsibility. It has been Mr. Tracy's pleasure to join with all of you who have spoken endorsing the work product that will be coming before us in the meeting. Mr. Tracy thanked Chris Escobar for providing meeting support for the committee. He thanked Matt Venhorst from the State Department of Education for advice and guidance as we work through this process. Mr. Tracy was pleased to reconnect with Bill (Davenport) after all these years and do something productive together. Mr. Tracy closed by thanking Superintendent Leone for calling us together for this worthy cause. He did so by managing not one but two school districts, dealing with a pandemic and has pushed us all to take on this issue of regionalization that has been percolating in this neck of the woods for literally decades. As Mr. Tracy has said on more than one occasion; if this was easy, somebody would have done it a long time ago. We are here in no small part thanks to your (Chris Leone) leadership and your expertise. We thank you for all that.

6) Adoption of Temporary Regional School District Study Committee Report

Motion: "The Temporary Regional School District Study Committee Report on March 11, 2022, be accepted and adopted.

Billie Jean Sideris made a motion to adopt The Temporary Regional School (District) Study Committee Report on March 11, 2002, as written. Mike Bergin seconded the motion.

Mr. Tracy opened the floor for discussion.

Mr. Venhorst appreciates the comments, stated this has been a great process and wishes the communities the best with this endeavor. The CSDE wants to effectuate the will of the community and if this is what the communities want, they will do everything to make that happen.

Mr. Venhorst wanted to clarify/confirm with the motion on the floor, that the committee is authorizing submission of the report to the State Board of Education.

Mr. Leone restated the motion is to adopt the report and amended as written tonight. Next, a draft will go to you (Mr. Venhorst) in case there are any issues. Then it will go back to the districts

attorneys, Chris Chinni and Fred Dorsey to cross-reference. Mr. Leone closed by saying Counsel looked at this. And yes, this is what the committee is doing.

Mr. Tracy clarified with each committee member that it was understood the committee is authorizing this to be submitted to the state as the superintendent has described. Each member in attendance gave an affirmative response.

Mr. Tracy called for a vote on the motion. **The Temporary Regional School (District) Study Committee Report on March 11, 2002, be accepted and adopted. The vote passes unanimously.**

7) Next Steps

Mr. Leone will incorporate the changes and provide the committee with one more opportunity to review the final report. No later than Friday, March 18, 2022, Mr. Leone will provide Mr. Venhorst a copy of the report, including the Appendix and corresponding documents, for a final review to avoid any last minute issues before submission to the state. The report will be transmitted in time for review at the State Board of Education meeting in May to allow for a June 2022 referendum.

8) Adjournment There being no further business to come before this committee, **Jill Johnson made a motion to adjourn. Bill Davenport seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.** The meeting adjourned at 7:00 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Christine Escobar
Secretary, pro-tem