

Public Hearing Minutes
Litchfield
June 2, 2022
Litchfield Intermediate School
8:00 p.m.

- I. Call to Order The Public Hearing Meeting – Litchfield was called to order at 8:00 p.m. by Bill Davenport.

Mr. Davenport invited the committee members to introduce themselves to the meeting attendees.

Temporary Regional School Study Committee Members present: Bill Davenport, Co-Chair, Stephen Tracy, Co-Chair, Margaret Hunt, John Morosani, Rob DeLayo, Billie Jean Sideris, Jill Johnson, and Mike Bergin. Also present: Chris Leone, Superintendent.

- II. Presentation of the Report of the Temporary Regional School Study Committee Regarding the Creation of a Regional School District Consisting of the Towns of Goshen, Litchfield, Morris, and Warren and the Statement of the Connecticut State Board of Education Concerning the Report

Mr. Leone presented the report of the Temporary Regional School Study Committee.

- III. Public Comments Concerning Item II
Mr. Davenport opened the floor for public comments.

Julia Hrica, Litchfield thanked the committee for their hard work and turned to the attendees and thanked them as well for being there. Ms. Hrica moved to Litchfield in 1962 and she and her husband graduated from Litchfield High School in 1978 and raised their family in Northfield and Milton. Her children are also graduates of Litchfield High School. Ms. Hrica went on to say all four of their (her family members) graduating classes were between 100 and 125 students and they had rich opportunities for students. Ms. Hrica is committed to the education of the children in the towns. She has been the director of *Room to Grow* since 1998, and before that had been a state-licensed in-home daycare and has worked with children in one capacity or another since the fall of 1978. Ms. Hrica was on the committee that began this process two years ago, has attended all but one of the public meetings held by this committee, and is clearly vested in this community, its children, and the merger. When her family members attended Litchfield High School it was rich with academic, athletic, and social opportunities. There were multiple foreign languages, science, home economics, shop, english, math, and cultural classes offered. There were so many electives that you had to choose which ones to take. When her children were in school there were multiple AP opportunities to choose from. The main sports teams had freshmen, JV, and varsity levels so students could develop their skills and then be able to compete at the varsity level and win. Many teams competed at a high enough level to qualify for state tournaments. There was a robust theater, music, and arts program. Ms. Hrica then commented, how can the

current Litchfield Public Schools offer this with 66 graduates this year? The current 11th grade has 63 students, 10th grade has 62, and 9th grade has 51 students. Voting power, budgets, and building usage are all addressed in the plan that was approved by the State Board of Education. Some of these guidelines (in the plan) are mandated by statute, some were put in place to preserve the needs of all four towns. In Ms. Hrica's opinion, these items are secondary to the responsibility the community has to the children. Is this plan 100% perfect for everyone? No, nothing in life is. The plan was designed so every community will have many opportunities and a few compromises. Isn't that what democracy is all about? Ms. Hrica shared; that this is a unique opportunity to make a change for our communities. It is in our hands. The voter's hands. She asks community members to take a moment to become informed. Watch or attend one of the presentations. Ask questions and make a heartfelt informed decision. Ms. Hrica will personally vote for the children's futures. She will vote yes and ask that others join her in this historic mission.

Jen Dorné, Litchfield commented instead of just putting links in community messages, people would feel more comfortable and secure if there was clear language communicated that ensures the elementary schools cannot be closed without a vote. Ms. Dorné feels it would be helpful for residents to understand their regional schools would not have a chance to be closed as this is an important issue for many people in the smaller towns. At first, Ms. Dorné was really, really opposed to a merger and has done an about-face. As a parent of a middle school student, she feels if the schools got bigger there would be more groups for kids to join up in not only the arts and sports but also in friend groups. This would make kids happier in school, kids would get along better, and there would be better friendships to be made by bridging these two groups. Ms. Dorné hopes the committee will put out a communication that includes clear language on the process for closing a school, so people feel more comfortable voting for this.

Kathleen Tranquillo, Bantam grew up here in Litchfield as did her husband. Ms. Tranquillo commends the committee for their hard work on this presentation. She is familiar with many people she got to know during the online meetings and during COVID and is pleased to see everyone in attendance this evening. Ms. Tranquillo, as a mother of five children ranging from Pre-K to a senior this year, said they have a lot to celebrate. By nature, she loves challenges and loved being a part of the first committee. Ms. Tranquillo is "all for" and loves the challenge we are going to face, the ones that we have already overcome, and the voyage ahead so is all positive.

Deanna Marchand, Litchfield, first wants to thank the committee members from this community for their commitment to creating this plan. It took some compromise, but they found a way to take everyone's concerns into consideration. Litchfield School System isn't perfect, Region 6 isn't perfect, and Region 20 won't be, but with decreased enrollment, it is the best path forward for the kids and the towns and it creates an opportunity with so much potential for the next generation. Ms. Marchand has two girls at Center School and was on the Working Group two years ago. She is here today to tell you why she is in support of the merger. A combined district creates educational opportunities, more course offerings in different areas, more courses that prepare kids for college, having enough kids enrolled in a class so it

isn't canceled or so there are enough students for a good discussion, group projects, and other students to present to. While these are important and wonderful things for the kids, one might be surprised to hear though, that this isn't the most important part of this plan in her eyes. Kids need opportunities outside of the classroom. Not so much to build their resume but to pursue their interests and be involved as members of their community. And to have broader social opportunities. The average grade size in Litchfield is 62. That's half of what it used to be. Ms. Marchand's daughter's incoming kindergarten class has 40 kids enrolled so far – there will be some more, but it will be a very small class. That's 20 potential prom dates that you went to school with since you were 5 (and some of them are cousins). Kids already live in a bubble. The size of their social world at school does not afford them enough social opportunity. The more people they are exposed to, the easier it is to find people they connect most with, while also being exposed to different people and opinions which helps them learn and grow and prepares them better for the world beyond high school and beyond Litchfield County. Today sports don't have enough kids for a team and when they do sometimes they aren't competitive and while winning isn't everything it's not fun to lose all the time. In a combined district we can field teams, and add JV or freshman teams when needed so kids are playing at the appropriate level. For kids where theatre or music is their passion, we can create more robust programs together and with more opportunities throughout the school year. We can have more clubs so kids can participate in things related to their interests. There are concerns about the loss of the WAMOGO/Litchfield rivalry. Tradition is important and rivalries can be a lot of fun. Growing up in Torrington, we loved to hate Watertown. Living in Boston, she got a kick out of a "Yankees suck" chant at a Bruins game. But if people can set aside their glory days, we can make way for these kids to create their own traditions in a new school. Some might also argue that having your rival in the same town isn't the best way to build community. Ms. Marchand hears old stories about grudges between the towns, which makes the thought of a combined school unpalatable for some. To those people, she says, you own that grudge, not the kids in these towns. They will know what we teach them, and we can teach them to hate their neighbors because they are different, or we can teach them that their friends that they play soccer with on the weekends are all a part of our community and that we are more alike than we are different because that is the truth. She encourages people to put aside their fear of change and fear of losing individual town control and collectively do what is best for our kids now and into the future. Ms. Marchand is asking voters to vote "yes" for Region 20.

Erin McKenna, Litchfield, currently has three children at Litchfield Center School. Ms. McKenna and her husband moved to Litchfield two years ago and believed in this town and believed in the community it instilled. Upon settling in they sent their kids off to school and signed up for fall sports. They quickly became aware that the community they became a part of reached beyond their town limit. Their kids were on the soccer field with Goshen residents, and their friend's parents had attended Wamogo. They played lacrosse in Morris. These towns were unified without ego or agenda and capable of working together. Their experience in town and at Center School has been nothing but positive yet Ms. McKenna worries. She worries that the opportunities offered at Litchfield High School today are not the same opportunities offered twenty years ago. She worries that the opportunities her children will have in

six years will be further reduced due to declining enrollment and increasing costs. She worries that their experiences and worldview will be severely limited due to small graduating class sizes, but she has hope that a newly formed Region 20 will offer more opportunities in the classroom, on the athletic field, and in the arts. Ms. McKenna has hope that these four communities, together as one, can provide the quality of education that children deserve. She has hope that through regionalization we can offer the stability and predictability to allow us to attract and retain the best teachers possible. She has hope that the strengths offered by the new district will further fortify the community and bring young families willing to settle and send their children to our schools. Ms. McKenna is excited that we now have the chance to take the best parts of each district and bring them together to further enhance our offerings and our children's education. Ms. McKenna understands the fear of the unknown and the desire to protect the status quo but she believes these four towns can and will work together to create a brighter future for children as the Region 6 towns have done for decades. A future not governed by ego or past biases, but one governed by doing what is best for our students. The committee here has already proven that this was possible in the work they completed and is excited to see the opportunities it will bring.

Scott Beebe, Litchfield commented he has three kids spread across Litchfield schools. He is an undecided voter still at this point. Mr. Beebe also wants to thank the committee for all the time and effort that has gone into this work as he believes it must be significant. Mr. Beebe mostly characterizes his position as "searching for more substance." He commented that he tries to participate in information sessions and forums and knows that there have been a lot of offerings, but he feels that a lot of the information has come across as "here is my sales pitch, here is my agenda" with things like "enhanced offerings" and "recommendations for this." They sound great. He is all for it. He truly hopes we can get there but there is a part of Mr. Beebe that wonders "how are we going to get there?" He knows there is a two-year period at least before the targeted start but what he struggles with when he goes to vote on June 28th will he be voting to form this board that he is going to trust to make all these things happen that sounded great on paper? Mr. Beebe is happy to scour the hundreds of pages of documents that he has tried to do so far. Mr. Beebe would like to understand the assumptions in some of the projections such as 75% of staff will be through attrition. When we talk about offering genetics and culinary, those things sound great but you can't just take any high school staff member and say "hey you're going to teach genetics now because our combined district has twelve people that want to learn that now." Some of those courses require specialized skills. He went on to question what are the assumptions about staff redundancy, how many sections can somebody teach and how are we going to get there? Mr. Beebe would like to see some things addressed in the follow-up Q & A that is going to come after these sessions. He went on to say he is more transparent and would like to learn some of the compromises and trade-offs that were talked about. He knows there are some and he feels like when the topic has come up before the issue has been skirted around a bit. He would like to see that addressed a little bit more head-on as he is sure the committee has had conversations about an actual number of staff.

Mr. Beebe feels like there is talk about percentages, and dollars in savings but when we talk about faculty reductions, staff reductions, and administration reductions, he is hoping there are actually hard assumptions other than what is on a PowerPoint slide. Mr. Beebe asked about the committee recommendations for building viability. Is that firm? He asked when we vote on June 28 based on the recommendations of the committee how likely or is it possible those things can change? When we vote on June 28th and say what is going to happen to Center School is that firm? When he goes to vote on June 28th is he voting for three people in Litchfield to be a part of the 12-member Board that will decide what really happens? Mr. Beebe is not criticizing the plan, but those are just some of the questions he has. Mr. Beebe will try to have an open mind and continue to search for some of the substance between now and June 28th.

Jackie Tiul, Litchfield thanked the committee for their time, hard work, and service and shared this is a great opportunity to hear others' perspectives. Ms. Tiul has five children and three have graduated. She has a 7th and 9th grader and feels those students will be the most impacted by the merger, so she is speaking for them. Ms. Tiul is speaking as a mother of recent graduates who has gone on to be very successful. Ms. Scozzafava has instructed her children and she is a big part of their success. Ms. Tiul wants to give a shout to the wonderful Litchfield High School teachers. She went on to say she feels like there is a lot of focus on the negatives of Litchfield. She for one loves the small class sizes. When her 24-year-old child had to choose between math and band, together they figured out a solution to make it work and she took an online course. Ms. Tiul reiterated that she is most concerned about those 7ths to 9th-grade students. Right now, we have come out of COVID, and the biggest concern is for their mental health. We see the statistics and we know these kids are suffering for many reasons brought on by COVID. Now we are going to take a school of 220 kids and make it a school of 600 and the negatives she sees in that even though the ratio is going to be the same, kids will not be known or seen, and right now in history, those kids need to be seen. Ms. Tiul also heard people say, oh we need a bigger band, bigger track, bigger music department; well, the music department in Litchfield is strong. The Litchfield Players are always full and yes, six people went to be in the Wamogo show in the fall. Ms. Tiul also hears the middle school bands aren't full. Well, look at the Litchfield Middle School band, completely full. She heard the track team had to combine but if you look at that it is mostly Litchfield with a few Wamogo kids that had to join. In all these issues that are being brought out, Ms. Tiul wants to reassure the parents of the younger kids that she hasn't seen that come to fruition and the only team that she had to see Litchfield join with Wamogo is softball and that is more the nature of the sport right now. Ms. Tiul is not sure she agrees with a lot of things that have been said. From her perspective, her 7th grader and 9th grader are going to be the most impacted. So, if we look at our 9th graders now they are making plans for prom, and they don't know what it is going to be like in senior year. Ms. Tiul would love it if the dates got pushed back a year or two so that kids entering high school will know that things are going to change in two years or three years. As Ms. Tiul said earlier, with COVID and dealing with everything from COVID now asking students to move schools the timing is just not right. She doesn't know what Litchfield has to gain in this merger. And for those that

are here that are Litchfield teachers, her kids were in Litchfield all the way through and are successful and have had a great education.

Ted Murphy, Litchfield has had the luxury of living in Litchfield in the winter and spending his summers in Goshen. Mr. Murphy is a graduate of Litchfield High School. His family lived in Milton, and he is one of five kids. Every summer he would pack his bags in August to go back to Litchfield and he wanted to go to school with his Goshen friends. He would say to his dad why can't I go to school with my Goshen friends? And his dad would say "that's a long story." Well, that story has been almost 70 years old. In 1980, Mr. Murphy he had the benefit of starting the Litchfield Rowing Club and starting a co-op program at school where both Litchfield and Wamogo kids participated in. Mr. Murphy always had really good friends in Wamogo that played in our band together. He has had a lifelong relationship with Wamogo and Litchfield. In the early 90's a gentleman by the name of James Eisenhaure, who had just retired as Superintendent of Schools from Wamogo came to his office. They got talking and the next thing you know we were on a mission to see if we could get the Selectmen in each town to create a committee and get these two schools together. Here is the Superintendent of Schools who helped build Wamogo, his name is on the auditorium, and he wanted to merge these two schools. Mr. Eisenhaure was a very smart man and unfortunately, they failed in their effort to merge the schools. They tried like heck but there was so much resistance on several fronts, and they didn't accomplish the goal. Mr. Eisenhaure asked Mr. Murphy "to keep up the fight." Mr. Murphy has always wanted this to happen. Mr. Murphy went on to talk about the schools saying they are half the size they were when he graduated. Two schools today make up one school back then. Today the demographics are different, the people are different, the income levels are different and yet the schools are smaller. Mr. Murphy believes with all his heart these schools together combined would be the best for the kids, academically wise, and bring homogeneous communities together. Mr. Murphy referenced the young lady who spoke early about the small classes and said we are not going to be able to give them the opportunities going forward with these small schools. Even combined, we are one of the smaller school districts in the state. There would be better athletics. There has been a great rivalry for 20 years. There is an alumni game between Wamogo and Litchfield every year during Thanksgiving. One year the Litchfield boys were beating the heck out of Wamogo winning by 17 points at halftime. And one of the Wamogo kids decided to take the game over and they won by 1 point. Mr. Murphy said to his son, what the heck happened? After the game, they all went to @theCorner and joked and laughed about the game. Mr. Murphy just believes the community and the kids will be better served, better athletics, better sports programs, and the whole program would be excellent if the schools merged. You have to take some risks when you pass off the final decision-making to a new board but that is democracy. That is what we do when we elect a Selectman every two years. We have to have faith in those people that we elect to be on the boards. He is all for it.

Caroline Ugurlu — Unavailable.

Kara Cruoglio, Litchfield offered her thanks to the committee for all of your hard work, for several years for some of you. Ms. Cruoglio moved from Washington DC in 2016 with her family just when her child was about to start kindergarten who is now in fifth grade at Litchfield Intermediate School. Her family chose Litchfield as their new home in a large part because of the size and quality of the school system. They have been nothing short of thrilled with the education their child has received so far. Each year they think it can't get better and then it does. But the realities of Litchfield High School loom large in their minds, the small and shrinking class sizes mean shrinking academic and extra-curricular opportunities while the expense of offering those opportunities increases. She wonders at what point will Litchfield be faced to cut programs and staff in order to stay within tolerable budget limits for the taxpayers. Ms. Cruoglio has already heard too many times from parents of high students about missed academic opportunities because their child had to choose between two different classes that were each only offered once and at conflicting times. She was pleased to hear tonight it is not always the case and that sometimes it can be worked out. Ms. Cruoglio commented a single foreign language offering in this day in age does not feel sufficient. The sports teams struggle to be competitive in the Berkshire League and above all, she questions if her child or any child will have the social skills needed to thrive beyond high school outside of Litchfield after spending all thirteen years with the same 50 or 70 classmates. Right down the road at Wamogo parents and students struggle with the same questions. These four towns have a long history of rivalry. She has learned a lot in her six years here but also knows has a long history of collaboration. She learned just last week, as recently as the 1950's, students from Morris went to high school in Litchfield. Her friends who grew up here talk about riding the bus back and forth between Litchfield High School and Wamogo in the 80's and 90's. Her child has been playing soccer with students from Warren and Goshen and they are some of his best friends. And she is unsure of those who do not have school-aged children if they are aware of just how unusual it is that the students had a full year of in-person learning during the 2020-2021 school year. Neither Litchfield nor Region 6 could have pulled that off alone. It was possible because of combining resources and working together. None of us can predict the future. No one knows what might happen with educational costs or buildings or rankings. The recommendation put forth by the Temporary Regional School Study Committee is a framework, not a blueprint. The referendum is ultimately about asking people in all four towns Goshen, Morris, Warren, and Litchfield to trust one another by buying into a way of thinking that will guide us we work together for the future of our towns and our children. Ms. Cruoglio looks forward to voting "yes" on June 28th.

Meg Finn, Litchfield wants to thank the committee for all the work that has been done. Finns are Wamogo people, and we are with the Tranquillo family who are Litchfield people. Between her brother and sister-in-law (Tranquillo) who are also here tonight, we are all trying to repopulate the town, so we don't have this issue. Ms. Finn graduated with 64 other humans some of whom are in this room. Ms. Finn asked the audience, "who has graduated with 64 or less in their graduating class?" (Few people raised their hands). Right? It's so not normal she said. She rowed on the crew team, and she thanked Mr. Murphy for that. She rode back and forth on the bus. All went to the prom with Wamogo kids so that everybody could go to the prom and Wamogo did the same thing for Litchfield so that every kid could go to the prom because otherwise

you were related to the whole rest of your class. Ms. Finn remembers thinking because you had examined it in 92' it would have been so cool if we all went to school together? And why couldn't the grown-ups just get it together because they had looked at it in the past? Then they looked at it in the 90s and it just made so much sense. It was obviously about money. Ms. Finn just hopes that at this time our kids will look back and say our parents were the ones that finally got it together and showed us how to compromise and gave us a graduating class of 125. And aren't we so lucky that even if we do merge, our kids are still going to be in a small school? The district would not move from Class S to Class M so we are still going to be in a small school, but we might have teams that win again or teams that we want to play on, so I hope you vote "yes."

Ian Sideris, Morris is from the graduating class of 2025 and a freshman at Wamogo. Mr. Sideris knows a lot of students, freshmen in both schools who are very open to merging. He went on to say no matter what year your student is, there are always going to be seniors this is going to happen to. He spoke about the rivalry and feels the only students who are sad about losing the rivalry are juniors and seniors. Mr. Sideris said he is friends with some sophomores, juniors, and some students from Litchfield and they don't care about the rivalry.

Alex Sideris, Morris is a Wamogo graduate, and he just wants to say the class sizes in Wamogo, and Litchfield are abysmally small. Mr. Sideris says it's a real problem. Whether you like small classes or not a class of 12 kids is not appropriate. Mr. Sideris shared he had a friend in his graduating class who found out a week before the end of the school year that a class he has wanted to take all four years of high school was now being offered. He didn't get to take the class and that is a real problem. Regarding the rivalry, Mr. Sideris says the students really don't mind losing the rivalry because there are going to be other rivals. He swam for at Wamogo and the rival for the swim team wasn't Litchfield, it was Nonnewaug. It is not a huge issue to lose the Litchfield rivalry. He went on to say he understands for the basketball team might be a little different as it runs a little deeper. Mr. Sideris thought it would have been awesome if for his senior year the Litchfield and Wamogo swim teams could have combined because they would have won the Berkshire League. Northwestern has dominated swimming in the Berkshire League for 17 years. Mr. Sideris thinks it is unfortunate to see that people don't want this to happen because if you had asked people from his graduating class if they thought that five years down the road the schools would have been merged the answer would have been yes. Unequivocally, every single person in his class would have said yes. Every single person in my brother's class would have said yes. This is not a matter of if, it is a matter of when. This is a huge opportunity. We have smart people working on this. He commented he may be biased because his mom is on the committee. Mr. Sideris believes we have the perfect superintendent to get it done. The Superintendent has been running both schools for 3 years now? (Mr. Sideris gestures to Mr. Leone and then laughs and says) some number of years; he has been running both schools. Someone mentioned culinary and genetics classes earlier. Mr. Sideris shared there is a teacher at Wamogo who is more than qualified to teach a genetics program and is a UCONN graduate. Wamogo has a culinary teacher that is more than qualified to teach and he is a great chef. There are a lot of qualified teachers at Wamogo that can teach

different classes and while I did not go to Litchfield, he is sure there are a lot of qualified teachers at Litchfield as well. These are not questions of if, these are questions of when. The students know this, and he thinks the people in the towns know that too.

David Wilson, East Litchfield is a State Representative and has grown up in Litchfield. His family has been here for 150 years. He graduated from Litchfield, and he jokingly shared he can't remember which year 64' or 65'? He can't remember because he stayed back as he flunked English when he was a junior. "How do you like that?" Representative Wilson commented that he hasn't heard anyone talk about what the state of Connecticut is up to. Whether you know it or not the state of Connecticut is headed toward regionalizing everything. Not only regionalizing your schools but regionalizing your health districts may be taking away local police departments and going to county-type government so if we don't do this now the state of Connecticut is going to tell you when to do it. While you have the control to make the decision locally he encourages people to think locally and get it done.

- IV. Adjournment There being no further business to come before this committee, Mr. Davenport requested a motion to adjourn. **Jill Johnson made a motion to adjourn. Mike Bergin seconded the motion.**

Before calling for a vote to adjourn Mr. Morosani requested permission to comment.

Mr. Morosani said this was the sixth presentation he has watched Mr. Leone give, though it feels like 30. He said, in every presentation, though this is the most populated he has seen and there was one presentation on Zoom with one person attending, and he (Mr. Leone) was in there giving his all, for the full time, as he did tonight, as he did in Morris, as he did in Goshen. Morosani as a member of this committee thanks him for what he has brought to this whole process in terms of sharing the facts with you all and talking straight. "Thanks, Chris for doing this."

Mr. Davenport thanked Mr. Morosani for bringing this up as he knows the entire committee feels the same way as the community, so "thanks again Chris for everything."

Mr. Davenport then called for a vote to adjourn.

The motion passes unanimously. The meeting adjourned at 9:19 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Christine Escobar
Secretary, pro-tem