

(Accepted as a record of a posted meeting of the Gill Selectboard)

Civic Leaders

Meeting #4 10/3/17 Gill-Montague Senior Center 6:30 – 8:30 pm

Facilitated by Debbie Lynangale of the Community Action Mediation and Training Collaborative

Notes by Jen Audley of the Gill-Montague Community School Partnership

13 civic leaders in attendance:

GMRSD – Michael Sullivan, superintendent; Joanne Blier, director of business and operations

GMRSC – Timmie Smith, chair (also chair of Gill finance committee); Jane Oakes, vice chair; Christina Postera, assistant treasurer; Mike Langknecht

Town of Montague – Steve Ellis, town administrator; Mike Naughton, finance committee vice chair; Richard Widmer, finance committee, Fred Bowman, finance committee

Town of Gill – John Ward, Selectboard; Ray Purington, administrative assistant; Sandy Brown, finance committee

Opening

School Committee Chair Timmie Smith called the meeting to order, noting that none of the boards or committees present had a quorum of members present

Debbie Lynangale gave an overview of the agenda

Richard Widmer asked if there would be time for questions related to presentations. Debbie Lynangale said yes, that could happen informally tonight, but there could also be a designated time for questions as the current series of educational/background sessions wrapped up.

Mike Langknecht noted that he would be leaving early (at 8 pm)

Discussion.

Initial conversations among small groups of three or four, then groups reported out on these two questions:

If there are no immediate, short term changes to the G-M school finance situation, what is the likely result of maintaining the status quo? What, if anything can be done?

The impact of maintaining the status quo would be ...

- MN, JO, FB: The outlook for this year (FY18) is ok, but by next year (FY19), the district's ability to balance its budget w/o impacting education may be at an end
- SE, CP, JW: In FY19 additional cuts will undermine capacity & increase outflow of students from the district. Towns are also struggling to keep up, Montague facing numerous expenses related to deferred maintenance & aging infrastructure
- MS, JB, ML, RP: Same as above, plus noted that efforts to improve schools in key areas would be stalled or slowed down
- RW, TS, SB: same as above, plus noted that status quo has an adverse effect on professional development, and increased enrollment this year precludes further cuts in instructional staff

Ideas for changing the short-term situation:

- Advocating for changes in the way charter school costs are charged to the district

- Towns make a short term agreement to provide additional revenue to GMRSD while planning for long-term solutions continues
- Better marketing of schools to the public, emphasis on visuals, videos, and other
- Pilot sharing of services and programs, work toward building attractive collaborative programs (ex math faculty at TFHS + shops at FCTS for engineering)
- Funding/support from towns specifically for a focused effort to retain and attract students
- Pursue state \$ for sparsely populated districts
- Advocate for fully funded transportation
- Seek efficiencies in concert with other districts

Responses

FB: Appear to be nearing the point of diminishing returns. Unfunded state mandates are a huge problem, need to put pressure on state legislators

SB: Charter reimbursement formula is a particular concern. *[Some discussion followed about charter school caps, which is a different issue, but also a matter of concern. Michael Sullivan offered to share letters written on these issues in the lead up to the last State elections.]*

MS: Legislative changes will take longer than one year, programmatic changes are more realistic for FY19

JW: Our local legislators are good, and we are well-represented in the MA Senate and regionally – but the governor & House leadership are not there for us

ML: Changing the minds of people who are deciding where to send their kids to school

Affordable Assessment Presentation (Mike Naughton)

Powerpoint and spreadsheets

Summary of presentation:

The “affordable assessment” was Montague’s idea, developed when Town found itself unable to afford what district said it needed. GMRSD budgets were being voted down by Town Meeting, which led to DESE taking over the district 2 years in a row. Karl Ladd (then interim superintendent), forged an agreement: In FY2010, Montague would contribute 48.5% of available funds – a document called the “Compact” included a spreadsheet (“Table B”) projecting increases for 5 years

Goal of the process was to get to a point where town felt it could afford the district’s assessment

Available funds = net tax levy (by far the largest portion) + net state aid + local receipts + free cash
 (However, Montague has since decided that use of free cash is not prudent, and has begun a process of reducing the contribution from free cash. Target is to eliminate use of free cash over next five years)

Timeline: Montague provides a preliminary estimate of the affordable assessment number in late Nov, but typically adjusts that estimate in late Jan and again in March as new information becomes available (might vary by 100-200K). These estimates are based on assumed revenues, and the underlying assumptions often change. Updated affordable assessment figure is updated by the Finance Committee.

GMRSD uses Montague assessment estimate to find an equivalent estimate for Gill (based on Gill enrollment.) Contributions fluctuate. Required local contribution (which is based on state's determination of town's ability to pay) + amount over requirement (which is based on enrollment). *[Joanne Blier explained this part.]*

Observations about Montague's calculations FY14-FY18:

- New growth has increased, so the net tax levy has been more than 2.5%
- State aid has gone up by 4%
- Receipts have also gone up
- Free cash is going down intentionally
- Adjustments are made to account for district debt (district gets permission from towns to borrow for large building projects such as high school renovations, Sheffield windows)
- In this period, Town Meeting voted once to exceed affordable assessment (by \$50K in FY17)

Some new variables:

First Light (hydro-electric) has contested its tax assessment (which affects both Gill and Montague) every year since FY14. The FY14 case is being decided now, and the results of that will likely influence how First Light chooses to proceed with FY15 and FY16. FY17 is different, because the assessment calculation changed that year. That calculation will be used for the next 5 years. While the Town is cautiously optimistic that the court will find in the Town's favor, there will not be a big payout as a result.

An item on the Montague Special Town Meeting warrant for Oct 6, 2017 could eventually increase revenue from taxes on other utilities due to re-valuation. (*This article passed.*)

When the affordable assessment formula was developed, choice & charter-out impacts were not factored in.

School District Expenses and Revenues Compared to Other Districts

Handout: "Data Comparison Using DESE RADAR Reports," using a new (not-yet-released) Dept of Elementary & Secondary Ed reporting tool (RADAR, replacing DART). 2016/17 data. Some data from other districts is questionable.

Comparisons with a group of 9 neighbors and similar districts, with "similar" defined in various ways. DESE offers data for three subcategories of enrollment:

- SWD – students with disabilities (This equates to students who have IEPs)
- Economically disadvantaged – students who qualify for free- or reduced-price meals
- ELL – students who qualify are English Language Learners

Notes:

Capacity to fund Foundation budget doesn't equate to overall wealth of community, because when enrollment declines the % may go up. (This has happened to neighboring districts such as Mohawk in the past decade.)

While some of the districts profiled have demographics that are similar to GMRSD, none of them compare across the board for Econ Disad, SWD and ELL. (Athol-Royalston, Winchendon, and Holbrook are comparable in two of the three categories.)

All-students enrollment for GMRSD declined by about 9% from 2010-2017 (1010 to 951), but the number of high needs students (students whom DESE considers to be economically disadvantaged, to have a disability, and/or to be English language Learners) increased during that same time period.

G-M has the highest per pupil expenditures of the 10 districts. Benefits and fixed costs are significantly higher. GMRSD spends \$18,790/student; of that amount, \$4265/student goes to benefits and fixed costs including health insurance for staff and retirees. This is about \$1185 higher than the average the other districts are spending on benefits and fixed costs. Recently completed negotiations did not result in any significant change to this situation in the next three years.

G-M spending is above the median in most categories, but generally comparable to neighboring districts and districts with the same number of students. While the number of paraprofessionals seems high, the range of roles currently being filled by those 46 individuals is considerable: 6 are one-to-one aides, 12 are in preschool & kindergarten classrooms, 9 are in therapeutic program classrooms, and several of the others are filling positions that were until recently classified and paid at a higher rate.

Also, some districts' data seems to be missing in some categories, and there are indications that some districts count and classify staff differently than we do.

Discussion:

Debbie Lynangale asked the group for thoughts about what they would like to explore in future meetings.

- MN – Some questions on Chapter 70 emerged that a subgroup intends to pursue. (Subgroup is Joanne Blier, Tupper Brown, Mike Naughton, Greg Snedeker)
- RW – history of the school district, public education in the area
- FB – last ten years have been a transition to stability for the school district. What is happening with the demographics of the towns?
- MN – would like to focus on things that might help us achieve financial and educational stability. Would like data comparing town salaries/benefits with school salaries/benefits, as that has long been cited as an area of inequity
- SE – Population projections are available and might be useful.

Next steps:

Debbie Lynangale will send out a poll & inquiry about forming working groups

Next meeting dates:

Tues., 10/17, 6:30-8:30 and Tues., 11/7, 6:30-8:30

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Signed copy on file. Accepted on 10/30/2017

Greg Snedeker, Selectboard Clerk