

(Adopted as minutes for the Gill Selectboard)

Civic Leaders

Meeting #1 8/15/17

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

Attendees:

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 – Rich Kuklewicz, Selectboard chair (also Franklin County Tech School board member); Steve Ellis*, town administrator; Mike Naughton, finance committee vice chair; Fred Bowman, finance committee; Richard Widmer*, finance committee

Town of Gill – Randy Crochier, Selectboard chair; Greg Snedeker*, Selectboard; Ray Purington, administrative assistant; Tupper Brown, finance committee; Claire Chang, finance committee; Sandy Brown, finance committee

Montague Reporter – Mike Jackson

Greenfield Recorder – Miranda Davis

MCTV – Dean Garvin

Welcome

Timmie Smith called the meeting to order, noting that the Gill and Montague Finance Committees, as well as the Gill Selectboard, had a quorum of members present.

Michael Sullivan introduced Debbie Lynangale, who asked attendees to introduce themselves briefly – name and role(s) that brought them to this meeting. In addition to their civic roles, the attendees whose names are marked with an * identified themselves as parents of students currently or recently enrolled in GMRSD schools.

Debbie Lynangale described the purpose of this and the next meeting (Sept 6) as “looking at issues from a ‘forest view,’” and noted that this group is not convening to make decisions

Brief conversations w/ a partner (different partners for each of these questions):

- What is a success story/something you like about education in Gill-Montague?
- What are the changes you see affecting education in this district?
- What is most frustrating or challenging for you right now in relation to education in Gill-Montague?
- What is your hope or vision for the future of this school district?

Voluntary sharing of reactions to partner conversations to the group, included...

- State (Commonwealth of MA) has not followed through on its promises w/r/t funding for choice and charter schools,
- Declining enrollment and need to understand reasons for it
- School buildings that were built for larger student bodies are underutilized assets
- Feelings of hope and shared sense of purpose, as well as concern and uncertainty
- Looking at this as a regional issue, not unique to GMRSD

Debbie Lynangale further described the purpose of the first two meetings as “focusing on coming together to understand needs,” and said she would discourage an initial focus on finding solutions

Issues Faced by the Schools

School District perspective:

Michael Sullivan referred to a handout: “GMRSD Budget Challenges 2017-8-15”

- School-age (“foundation”) population and enrollment trends (both declining)
- Issues and projections related to revenue and expenditures
- Possibility of changes in how State legislature handles Chapter 70
- Towns’ contributions will not be sufficient if Affordable Assessment formula is used in future
- Prospect of additional staff and program reductions, continuing deferred maintenance and initiatives

Towns’ perspective:

Gill

Greg Snedeker: rural towns have limited capacity to grow or generate revenue, questions about formula for EQV (assessors’ term: equalized value), possibility of additional exemptions for rural towns, Gill Elementary families wish 6th graders could participate in sports at GFMS/TFHS, wonders if MIAA rules are the last word on this). *[In a follow-up comment, Rich Kuklewicz noted that FCTS minimum contributions from towns provide a snapshot of how EQV fluctuates over time.]*

Tupper Brown: This group needs to understand how the Affordable Assessment formula came about, also expressed overall concern about viability of district and named Medicare reimbursements as a particular concern

Ray Purington: Historical record shows the same topics coming up over and over. The cycles seem to be getting shorter, but the issues don’t seem to have changed (cited the report of the 1992 Gill School Study Committee)

Montague

Steve Ellis: we may be able to learn from Berkshire County’s experience; rates of valuation are lowest here; in addition to focusing on financial side of things, hope to promote a vision of Montague as an attractive place for young, aspiring families to settle; town has many assets that support this vision, but we must actively resist reinforcing negative perceptions [In follow up discussion, *Claire Chang noted that*

overcoming the shortfall projected for FY19 would require enrolling 80 additional students. Rich Kuklewicz described growing the student population as a “decades-long process” and spoke to the need for creative solutions in addition to increasing enrollment. Noted that regionalization has been “thrust on” neighboring districts in nearby states.

Michael Naughton: Current situation w/ likely budget shortfall & ask towns to contribute more is same as what led to development of Affordable Assessment formula in 2009. “The best education we can afford” reflects the towns’ earnest desire to support education and recognition that resources are genuinely limited. The formula was based on assumptions about what the Commonwealth would contribute, and the state has not lived up to its responsibility. What other ways are there to fund education that don’t hinge on student population?

Fred Bowman: State legislators need to understand our issues. Promises made when regionalization began have not been kept, and neither have charter school funding promises. Schools are a key factor in attracting new residents.

Identifying key issues and questions

- If you could, what would be the top three issues that would help this group move forward?
- What questions need to be responded to in order to move forward?

Small group discussions, each group reported top issues and questions, which are summarized below.

Need to explore creative solutions, homegrown solutions, “really creative” solutions. Consider prioritizing local goals over state mandates

Collaboration w/ like-minded partners, including shared resources, additional regionalization, access technical expertise from people/organizations who know more than we do

State involvement/State formula(s)/Charter Schools Assess the real likelihood for positive change in this realm

Role of schools in future vision for towns. School needs seen as in competition w/ capital needs – how might towns’ investment in schools be seen as having a more direct benefit to residents?

Reconsidering Affordable Assessment process/formula. Are further reductions possible?

Increasing enrollment, through marketing and other means

Defining real, actionable short- and long-range plans

Common Themes

Group identified and named common themes they heard in discussion:

- Understand options and opportunities in current funding
- Learn about things that could be approached differently or done in addition to current funding scenario
- Identify actionable ideas

Closing

Debbie Lynangale noted that the purpose of this and the next meeting is to share information. After the two initial meetings, the group will determine how (and whether) to proceed

Discussion: How much hope/faith do we have in this group and this process at this point?

- This is an action-oriented, positive-minded group
- Expect it to be a lengthy process
- Wondering if other districts, and/or state officials should be involved? (Specific question about status of a group called the “Franklin County School Committee Caucus.”)

Gill Selectboard and Finance Committee adjourned.

Montague Finance Committee adjourned.

Meeting adjourned at 8:30 p.m.

The next meeting will be September 6, 2017 from 6:30 – 8:30 pm at the Gill-Montague Senior Center.

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Signed copy on file. Approved on 09/05/2017

Greg Snedeker, Selectboard Clerk