

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

**GILL-MONTAGUE REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT & CIVIC LEADERS, with
PIONEER VALLEY REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT HEART COMMITTEE**

November 21, 2017

6:30-8:30 pm

Montague Senior Center

Attendees:

G-M Regional School Committee: Timmie Smith, chair (also Gill Finance Committee), Jane Oakes, Shawn Hubert, Mike Langknecht

G-M Regional School District: Michael Sullivan, Joanne Blier

Town of Gill: Greg Snedeker (Selectboard), Ray Purington (Administrator), Sandy Brown (Finance Committee):

Town of Montague: Fred Bowman (Finance), Mike Naughton (Finance), Richard Widmer (Finance)

HEART Committee: Michelle Giarusso (chair+ former PVRSD SC + chair of Leyden finance), Ginger Robinson (Leyden Finance), Tony Matteo (Northfield Finance + retired from PVRSD), Sue O'Reilly McRae (Warwick, PVRSD SC)

Betsy Williams, The Mediation and Training Collaborative, facilitating
Mike Jackson, Montague Reporter, reporting
Jen Audley, Gill-Montague Community School Partnership, note-taker

- **Opening of the meeting (School Committee Chair)**

Timmie Smith observed that none of the public bodies represented had a quorum of members present.

- **Introductions, warm-up**

Betsy Williams asked participants to introduce themselves by each sharing a concern & a hope they have for local public schools

Michelle – sustainability, and the cost of really good education. getting all 26 towns in Franklin County talking in a collaborative way.

Ginger - change funding to favor rural schools

Tony - that “things go back the way they were”

Greg - the unfairness of the 82.5% cap, open eyes of state legislature to that

Ray - sustainability, strength in numbers

Mike N - “I don’t see a workable short-term solution given the current funding model. My hope is that I’m wrong.”

Timmie - sustainability, collaboration, more people around the table

Michael S - Impact of financial constraints on quality of learning experience, creative ways to do things differently in county and district, including new ways of structuring education.

Joanne - financial sustainability. Look outside the box, different way of doing things.

Richard - As a parent and current long-term sub at Great Falls Middle School "I'm seeing what 20 million dollars gets us." Wants "kids to see that they have a great school already," they are "swimming in resources" Hope we can deal from our strengths, make ourselves attractive to outsiders and students.

Fred - sustainability, affordable assessment policy G-M uses may not work much longer, need to engage legislators on various fronts (charter, choice, transportation) but that's a long-term strategy. Regionalization is far off. Wonders what is the motivation for the state to encourage regionalization?

Jane - School Committee member now, also a former teacher and lifelong resident. At recent state conference for School Committees, the interim director of dept of education was very vocal about there being too many small districts. Didn't offer have solutions, just named it as a problem. Hopes all school districts locally become stronger, separately or together. Meeting the changing needs of our students.

Shawn - At MASC the underlying theme was "you are going to fail unless you have the support of the town and the community." Get townspeople involved more with the school system.

Mike L - The current financial model won't support the current education model. Vague threats from the state about "too many little districts" aren't new. DESE will be supportive if we can come up with some ideas.

Sandy B - sustainability. State should fund transportation and charter schools so it's not a loss for local schools. 82.5% cap, they've never been able to explain it.

- **Presentations by Gill Montague Civic Leaders and HEART Committee:** goals of the group, who participates, current and past activities or focus, relationships with other school- or town-related entities, etc.)

Contributors to description of G-M civic leaders: Michael Sullivan, Mike Naughton, Fred Bowman, Timmie Smith, Jane Oakes, Jen Audley

G-M Civic Leaders

Superintendent conceived/floated idea in June/July 2017 – that town managers and SC would discuss not just finances, but also vision of education: "How can the school district's goals mesh w/ the towns' goals?"

School Committee (via superintendent) invited Selectboards, Finance Committees, and Administrators from each of the towns to participate. Town bodies approached decision about who would go in various ways; individual attendance has varied, but most of the invited public bodies have been represented each time so far. Meetings are posted by School Committee at gmrsd.org, open to public and subject to Open Meeting Law.

5 meetings prior to tonight's. Started by identifying questions and issues of shared interest (impact of choice and charters, decisions made at state level that have created problems for cities and towns, potential for new funding sources for rural schools) -- then took a deep dive into developing shared understanding of our district's finances.

HEART Committee

Contributors to description of HEART Committee: Michelle Giarusso, Ginger Robinson, Tony Matteo

A grassroots effort, not initiated by schools. Bernardston and Leyden Finance Committee had concerns. Selectmen called the first meeting, which was well attended and led to formation of committee. "HEART" stands for "honest education and retaining trust."

First meeting was in Feb 2017, 18-20 members originally, now 12 people appointed from the 4 PVRSD towns, with a resignation today. Committee included teachers and parents initially but less so now, district administrators have not participated.

Advice from Mohawk led to decision to seek funding for facilitation. First grant for \$6000, from FRCOG. Warwick and Northfield recently got \$25K from Community Compact.

- **Group brainstorm/discussion**

What are key challenges both districts are facing related to school finance?

GMRSD: Gill and Montague employ a formula to determine an "affordable" assessment each year, and their assessments have grown in recent years, but what we get from the state has remained flat. Charter/choice out is consistently a loss. Some expenses, such as employee benefits, increase every year. As a result, Gill-Montague RSD budgets are "structurally off" by about 400K/yr.

Balancing the budget keeps the district from being able to make programmatic changes -- treading water rather than moving forward. While enrollment in GMRSD schools has increased for two years in a row, the trend in the county is downward. The pie is not getting bigger. Options seem to be either to work together to make the pie bigger (more funding, more students) and/or to compete more effectively for a limited number of students.

HEART: Major concerns include lack of information about school budget and finances and communication between district leadership, school committee, and towns + large number of layoffs and resignations at PVRHS + concern about potential elementary school closings + district agreements haven't been reviewed or updated in a timely manner + school lunch program deficit + deteriorating relationship between administration and staff at PVRHS

PVRSD tax base is different than Gill-Montague (almost entirely residential). Lack of good jobs for graduates, so kids move away when they grow up, elementary schools in neighboring districts closing, declining enrollment.

Formulas and funding changing at the State level seems to be called for, but that will take a long time. First step is to get the legislature's attention and then convincing them to do it.

Regionalization has been considered before, but didn't go anywhere. Most recently in 2009, the state convened reps from all 26 towns, Bob Pura from GCC, and legislators for a meeting

where it was suggested that we consolidate Franklin County into 3 districts. (There's a report that came out of this meeting, which members of both groups were familiar with.)

Transportation - cost and effects on educational quality - is a big obstacle to regionalization.

Jane Oakes: We need to collaborate now so we don't have to take the state's word for what we need to do out here. They might just draw a line on the map.

Mike Naughton: Every district for itself is a losing game in the long run. We need to figure out a way to work together effectively. The history here in G-M is that the towns started rejecting school budgets and then the state had to come in and fiscally oversee the district for two years. From that, the state observed that "We're not stupid, we just don't have any money" but didn't offer much in the way of help. Affordable assessment formula was how we solved it locally, but now that. What if several districts did the same thing simultaneously? If multiple districts were taken over by the state at same time, that would get the attention we need?

Fred Bowman: Three years from now the state is likely to come in and say "do it." We've got to figure it out now or it's going to be "do what we tell you" later.

Mike Langknecht: The state doesn't have the resources, will, or power to redesign our schools.

- **Information-sharing about grant proposals and planned future work**

- HEART: Community Compact grant and RFP development

Ginger Robinson – Community Compact grant has already been awarded, but we put the brakes on the RFP until we talked with you. Proposal is to hire a researcher to collect data about our district, demographics, expenses ... basically talk to everyone. HEART committee will host open meetings with the town – We want to know about successful practices and policies. Innovations in school structure. What are doctoral students looking at? We hope to get recommendations and to base decisions on information. We want everyone to be happy.

Tony Matteo – Also want to understand reasons for declining enrollment, specifically at Pioneer.

Sue O'Reilly McRae of Warwick, appointee to the HEART and PVRSC, joined the meeting at this point.

She named two reports as useful resources: the "Adams Cheshire" report (referred in Community Compact application materials), and "2020 Vision" report from 2009.

- GMRSD: Current exploration of regional approaches and "Efficiency and Regionalization" grant application to support that work

(All present had received the proposal that GMRSD, FCTS, and PVRSD submitted to the MA Dept of Revenue for its "Regionalization and Efficiency Grant" program prior to the meeting.)

Michael Sullivan: This started with me talking to Franklin County Tech superintendent about partnering in some way. Motivation was to explore how TFHS could better meet the needs of students who aren't college-bound at graduation.

Then we heard about PVRSC's interest in exploring shared administration. The Regionalization and Efficiency grant seemed like it could be a way to get some serious study done about options for collaboration.

All three of the School Committees involved were aware of and supported applying for the grant; the proposal was written under a tight timeline, mostly by G-M superintendent. So the idea is to use the grant funding to try doing some things together on a smaller scale instead of everything all at once.

The proposal that was submitted describes three projects:

One is to hire consultant(s) to conduct a feasibility study of possible regionalization or shared operations among any combination of GMRSD, PVRSD, and FCTS.

A second is to consider options for next school year to pilot shared programming with Tech, including opportunities for shared staff, and transportation costs for TFHS and FCTS students traveling between campuses.

The third is to consider, for next year, options for possible shared services with PVRS, such as superintendent, curriculum director, IT, food services - basically a first step towards the districts getting to know each other and doing things together.

This budget for this proposal was \$110K

Mohawk superintendent applied to the same program on behalf of the Rural Schools Coalition for \$180K.

Discussion/Questions:

Michele Giarusso: How would town assessments change for the 19 towns at the Tech School under a two campus model? Would what they pay to Tech be shared with GMRSD?

Mike Langknecht: That's the sort of thing the consultant would be figuring out.

Shawn Hubert: Should we widen the net to be more inclusive and explore additional partnerships/collaborations?

- **Final discussion – reactions, questions, possible areas for collaboration, possible next steps, immediate actions or follow-up**

Ginger Robinson: One thing that we want to know is does it make sense to close Leyden School? We need to get data.

Sue McRae (to Michael Sullivan): What are your thoughts on districts sharing a superintendent?

Michael Sullivan: Boston's interest in this strategy is about efficiency (they would have fewer superintendents reporting to them). Cost savings would not be great, because double workload would require increased compensation and increased support staff. Only worth it if districts are interested in working together with something in mind besides cost savings.

Sue McRae: Special ed, healthcare, transportation are the costs that stand out in school budgets

MS: Healthcare costs at GMRSD wouldn't be reduced by regionalization; consolidation of special ed might help

Greg Snedeker: We need to hit all these points. I think we should into it all. The 82.5% cap is unfair (gave Barnstable as an example). We also need to educate parents about school funding – they think it's simple and it's not.

Fred Bowman: Consider the history of the Tech School. Originally, it was authorized by a town-by-town vote, and it got voted down. It only became possible when the laws changed and it was done by a regional vote.

The HEART Committee invited people from the Civic Leaders group to attend their meetings: Next scheduled are 12/6 and 12/18 at Northfield Town Hall, both 6:30-8:30 p.m.

The groups agreed to stay in contact about the Community Compact RFP and who they hire. (Don't pay twice for the same work.)

GMRSC meets only once in Dec: 12/11.

Next Civic Leaders meeting scheduled for 12/5.

Meeting ended at 8:34 p.m.

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Signed copy on file. Approved 12/26/17

Greg Snedeker, Selectboard Clerk