Windham Elementary School Board Act 46 AGS Proposal Presentation to SBE-Sept. 19, 2018

In response to your questions, we present the following: Is merger possible? No, the Town of Windham voted against merger – we did not consent. Our duly warned and voted motion does not represent “community sentiment”, rather it represents democracy, and Windham voters said no. To ignore our vote makes a mockery of democracy. A subsequent survey reaffirmed the very strong will of the community that our local school board be retained along with our budget, contrary to Footnote 51 of the Acting Interim Secretary’s Plan. Additionally, the property issues associated with a forced merger constitutes a “taking” of our property and we are researching and participating in legal action to oppose this.

Is it practicable? No, we are geographically isolated. The road between Windham and the rest of the district is designated as a “High-Risk Rural Road” and travel between Windham and other communities in the district can be very dangerous. This does not promote convenient community participation in school-related activities. In the words of now Secretary, Dan French, in his June 30, 2017 document, *Southern Vermont Regional Governance Analysis – Route 100 Corridor*, “Having lived in arguably some of the most remote areas in the Northeast Kingdom for 15 years, I would have to say the schools in the WCSU and WSSU are more isolated from each other than many in the Kingdom due to mountainous terrain, a significant variable when considering any changes to the governance structure.” The Windham School Board has invited you on several occasions to do a site visit, something that is necessary in order to do due diligence if you care about the health, safety, and welfare of the children of Windham. So far, you have not paid us that visit and until you do, your work will be incomplete. Additionally, there is a significant disparity in debt amongst the schools in the district.

Why does geographic isolation matter? Let’s now acknowledge the elephant in the room – school closure. We tiptoe around the issue saying that that is not what we’re talking about but, in fact, given the WCSU Superintendent’s recent Proposal Plan B, which includes closing Jamaica School, it is a reality. When asked where Windham would have fit into the plan, we could not get an answer. If forcibly merged, what we foresee is the systematic dismantling of the Windham School and with one member on an eleven-member board we will be powerless to oppose it. This dismantling and the distancing of the public from decisions made regarding the schools are evidenced by the recent West River Modified Union Education District vote to send 6th graders to Leland and Gray High School – a decision that has met with disapproval on the parts of many.

The Acting Interim Secretary’s Plan states “Therefore, Vermont law requires the State Board to look to the entire region when making its determinations, and not just at the possible consequences of merger on any one of the potentially merging districts.” That’s not the state law I voted for. Is the Acting Interim Secretary really saying that the region is more important than the health, safety, welfare, and, yes, education of Windham’s children? If so, that’s unconscionable. Other elements, including Footnote 52, of the Acting Interim Secretary’s Plan show a complete lack of understanding of our geographic location, proximity to other towns in the district, and road/weather conditions. It’s almost as if she were saying, “Don’t confuse me with facts, my mind is made up”.

As a legislator, I was convinced to vote for Act 46 by Speaker Shap Smith who assured me that this was an opportunity to allow school districts, potentially in different supervisory unions, to talk together to find more cost-effective ways to provide high quality education to our children. Never was the intent envisioned to include forcible merger of school districts in towns that had voted against it, taking their property, and creating a situation that made it impossible for a school, especially a geographically-isolated one, to continue. During my 20 years in the Legislature I have had proud voting moments – civil unions and marriage equality come to mind. Act 46 and what it’s become may prove to be my least proud, and one that I wish I could take back.

We, in Windham, are now being forced, as strong supporters of public education, to consider something we never thought we’d have to – closing our school and going to choice. There is a group in Windham that is researching the establishment of an independent school and another group that is considering a constitutional challenge to Act 46 given that the Vermont Constitution makes it clear that “a competent number of schools ought to be maintained in **each town** unless the general assembly permits other provisions for the **convenient** instruction of youth”. Busing students down a “High-Risk Rural Road” is not convenient, safe, or healthy.

As to why our proposal is the best way to meet Act 46 goals, it is all before you in our AGS Proposal. We strongly value our collaboration with the WCSU and will continue to work for excellence in education, providing equity amongst all the district’s children to the best of our ability given our geographic isolation so that we achieve or exceed the state quality standards and maximize operational efficiencies. Presenting our budget at the Windham Town Meeting is the ultimate way to promote transparency and accountability to our taxpayers and we defy anyone to explain to us how a budget that includes four elementary schools and a district high school can possibly be more transparent and accountable then one presented on its own. Finally, we will continue to provide education in a safe, convenient manner to Windham’s children and one that is delivered at a cost that parents, voters, and taxpayers value. After countless years of Windham School budgets being passed on a unanimous voice vote, we can’t do much better than that.

It was pointed out in the Acting Interim Secretary’s Plan that there might be benefits to such a merger, for example, “no need for the complex accounting mechanisms necessary to support an interrelated PreK-12/7-12 district and a PreK-6 district.” Seriously? Is bookkeeping more important than our children’s health, safety, and education? Before you impose forced merger on us, please indicate specifically the benefits to our children because we see none. We believe that if we are forcibly merged, there will be no money saved – it will, in fact, be more expensive; there will be less accountability and transparency; and most importantly, Windham children’s education will suffer.

We once again ask that the State Board of Education do a site visit to our school so that we may take you on a bus ride down and up Windham Hill Road in order for you to do due diligence regarding our situation. Additionally, we ask that you approve our Alternative Governance Structure Proposal for several reasons. We voted against merger, we are geographically-isolated, and there is great debt disparity. We ask you to not follow the Acting Interim Secretary’s recommendation and allow Windham School District to continue as it has been for the sake of our children’s safety, education, and well-being.