Dear Antje

The purpose of this note is to give you a sense of the meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee on Thursday March 12.

We began with a report from the five people who went to Montpelier yesterday to testify regarding Act 661 and the acts regarding the Weighting Study. The Windham delegation had a full half hour with the House Education Committee in which they discussed the impact of ESCE on our school budget and town tax rates because of the penalties we are incurring. The committee engaged with our people, asked good questions and acknowledged the importance of the issues they raised. Our group felt fully heard.

There was a press conference in which the advocates of the Weighting Study from towns all over the state spoke in enthusiastic support of the new proposed formulas and their early implementation. Our “delegates” then were all able to use their two minutes before the Senate Committee considering the bill. That meeting was not one of give-and-take as the House committee meeting was. The Senate meeting was mostly a matter of giving testimony for the record; more like a public hearing.

The takeaway was one of optimism that the combination of these two bills, in whatever form they finally see full debate, could offer significant relief to Windham taxpayers and other towns as well.

Our Committee then reviewed again the revised proposed budget for 2021 supplied by Laurie Garland. We concluded that all options have been considered carefully, and see three primary components to the plan going forward.

The strategy of going to a single teacher for next year, while not without its acknowledged possible drawbacks, makes a major step in reducing taxes. Mr. Parker-Jenning’s skills and experience should enable him to deliver a high-quality educational environment; and his enthusiasm for the task is impressive. We also note the apparent support for the idea by the WCSU.

It is apparent that after the reduction due to removing one teacher’s salary and health insurance we are within reach of the Excess Spending Threshold.

With regard to the idea of paying down the deficit in three years, we discussed at length your thoughtful comments about the risk of borrowing to pay a deficit that could be increased next year as a result of another “surprise.” The feeling of the room was that with the combination of the weighting study and the possible changes in ESCE funding the risk is minimized and worth taking if it enables us to produce a budget close to or even below the EST while maintaining a high-quality educational environment.

The third significant item discussed at Monday’s meeting is music education. We all agree that music is an important part of the school curriculum. We are also aware that after eliminating art from the budget, the school board has been very successful in utilizing local artists to supply this component. The consensus in the room is that whether through a grant or contribution or by utilizing the instructional skills from the many fine musicians in town, we could very likely fill a rich and rewarding music curriculum. We hope this idea gets full consideration by the Board.

As we looked at the numbers again in became apparent that these steps, taken together, would put Windham below the Excess Spending threshold, eliminate all penalties and produce a tax rate of about 1.6, which would represent a return to something close to normal after the shock of 2019 and 2020.

To summarize: while we do not presume to “recommend” we would like you to know that we think the single teacher strategy is imaginative and certainly worth a full effort, even if only as a one-year measure. We also feel the risk represented in borrowing to reduce the deficit over three years is preferable to letting that entire amount go to the penalty column and be added to the tax liability.

As regards music education, to the extent that getting below the EST is important, it can’t be done without removing that item and finding another way to bring music to the school. You have apparently done very well with art by using local resources. We would be supportive of efforts to do the same with music, again, as a one-year effort.

There are reasons to be hopeful that some relief is possible beginning as early as next year.

We offer these comments in a spirit of collegiality and with respect and thanks for the very hard work and careful thought you have invested in this process.