

AGENCY OF EDUCATION
Barre, Vermont

TEAM: School Governance Team

ITEM: Will the State Board of Education approve the July 7, 2017 request of the White River Valley Supervisory Union (WRVSU) PK-12 Operating Study Committee (Study Committee) to **REVOKE APPROVAL** of the **CONTINGENT PROPOSAL** to form a unified union school district by two member districts of the WRVSU (**BETHEL** and **ROCHESTER**)?

RECOMMENDED ACTION:

1. That the State Board finds that the Study Committee's request for it to revoke its approval of the contingent proposal for the Bethel and Rochester School Districts to form a new unified union school district is "in the best interests of the State, the students, and the school districts" pursuant to 16 V.S.A. § 706c(b).
2. That the State Board votes to revoke its May 16, 2016 approval of the contingent proposal.

STATUTORY AUTHORITY: 16 V.S.A. § 706c; Act 46 (2015), as amended; Act 153 (2010), Secs. 2-4, as amended; Act 156 (2012), Sec. 15, as amended; Act 49 (2017)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

I. General: The WRVSU consists of ten town school districts with five distinct models of governance. After passage of Act 46, the ten districts formed three formal study committees under 16 V.S.A. § 706. The study committees presented proposals to the State Board of Education on February 21, 2017 to create three new unified union school districts with the following members:

- The White River USD (PK-12 operating) – Bethel; Rochester; Royalton¹
- The First Branch USD (PK-8 operating/9-12 tuitioning) – Tunbridge; Chelsea
- The Granville-Hancock UD (PK-12 tuitioning) – Granville; Hancock

At that time, in order to be eligible for the tax rate reductions and other transitional assistance available for the creation of "Side-by-Side" mergers under Act 156 of 2012, formation of each of the three proposals was contingent on creation of one PK-12 district that operated all grades and at least one PK-12 district that tuitioned some or all grades. In order to ensure eligibility, the proposed articles of agreement conditioned formation of the First Branch USD and the G-H USD

¹ See Agenda Item Q1 from the February 21, 2017 State Board of Education meeting for the January 31, 2017 Report for the Bethel, Rochester, and Royalton School Districts. See Item Q for earlier, incorporated reports.

on voter approval of the White River USD. Similarly, formation of the White River USD was contingent on voter approval of either or both of the other two proposals.

The school boards presented the proposals to the voters on April 11, 2017. The voters in Bethel, Rochester, Chelsea, Tunbridge, Granville, and Hancock each approved their respective proposal. The voters of Royalton disapproved the proposal. As a result of Royalton's vote and the contingencies written into each of the proposals, none of the three proposed unified union school districts would have been formed unless the voters in Royalton approved the proposal on reconsideration.

The PK-12 Operating Study Committee reconvened and voted on May 2, 2017 to support an *amended* proposal to create a new unified district by merging the Bethel and Rochester School Districts (Contingent Proposal). The Study Committee stated that if the original three-district merger proposal (Original Proposal) was not approved on reconsideration, then the Contingent Proposal would be presented to the voters of Bethel and Rochester prior to October 1, 2017. The Study Committee acknowledged that the Contingent Proposal did not present the same level of potential benefits as the Original Proposal.

The State Board approved the Contingent Proposal on May 18.

On June 13, the Royalton voters reconsidered their initial vote and approved the Original Proposal.

On June 20, the Rochester voters reconsidered their original votes and withdrew their approval of the Original Proposal.

The PK-12 Operating Study Committee reconvened on July 6. It approved a motion to request the State Board to revoke its approval of the Contingent Proposal and made that request by letter dated July 7 and addressed to the State Board and Secretary Holcombe (attached). As explained in more detail in that letter, the Study Committee:

- Decided not to invoke a provision in the Original Proposal (that would have allowed it to present a modified version of the Original Proposal) due to timing concerns and a preference for the model of board representation set out in the Original Proposal and not included in the potential modified version.
- Acknowledged that the Contingent Proposal was prepared as a “stop-gap approach that was developed in response to Royalton’s [initial] rejection of the original plan, and not really large enough to make a substantial educational difference nor to provide long-term financial stability.”

It is our understanding that the School Boards of both the Bethel and Rochester School Districts subsequently approved motions to support the study committee's request that the State Board revoke approval of the Contingent Proposal based upon a determination that the plan is not in the best interests of the district.

The School Boards of the Bethel and Royalton School Districts appointed a new Study Committee that developed and approved a merger proposal for their two districts that closely resembles the

Original Proposal. This proposal is also before the State Board for review and approval at its August meeting.

The Rochester School Board continues to discuss the manner in which the District will move forward. For example, the community is considering voting to stop operating multiple grades and instead to pay tuition for students in those grades.

Although the 2017 Legislature (1) removed the requirement that one newly-unified district in a "Side-by-Side" operate PK-12 and (2) extended the deadline for voter approval of "Phase 2" mergers, the three WRVSU proposals are dependent upon each other's passage by their own terms and the Bethel-Royalton proposal needs to be placed before the voters soon.

If the Contingent Proposal is not revoked, then the Bethel and Rochester School Boards will be required to present that Contingent Proposal to their voters before October 1. Given statutorily-required warning and reconsideration periods, a vote on the Contingent Proposal would prevent timely voter consideration of the new Bethel-Royalton proposal.

Accordingly, it is advisable for the State Board to revoke its May 2017 approval of the Contingent Proposal, thereby allowing the Board to review and potentially approve the Bethel-Royalton 706 Study Committee's proposal, which closely resembles the Original Proposal that the Board approved in February.

STAFF AVAILABLE: Donna Russo-Savage, Principal Assistant, School Governance

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WRVSU PK-12 OPERATING STUDY COMMITTEE **White River Valley Supervisory Union** **461 Waterman Road** **Royalton, Vermont 05068**

July 7, 2017

State Board of Education
Rebecca Holcombe, Secretary of Education
219 North Main Street, Suite 402
Barre, Vermont 05641

Dear Secretary Holcombe and the State Board of Education,

As you know, we have been working hard over the past 18 months to develop a pathway forward to improve educational opportunities in the White River Valley and to create long-term sustainability for our education system and our taxpayers. We have made a great deal of progress, but find ourselves needing your help. We are asking the Board to revoke its decision on May 16 to endorse the alternative plan put forward by our committee which involved only Rochester and Bethel.

Background

On February 22, you approved a plan for our communities which called for the creation of a union district involving Bethel, Rochester, and Royalton. We were very excited about that plan that called for elementary education to be delivered in all three towns, middle school education in Bethel, and high school education in Royalton. An outdoor education program was planned for Rochester, using their school building and outdoor facilities. Despite the geographic challenges of this plan, we felt it was the best one for our communities.

Because we had developed a strong sense of mutual mission, we made all three communities “necessary”. We knew that it could be a heavy lift for Rochester, largely because of geographic and logistical concerns. Because of that, we included in that original proposal Article 13 which said that if Rochester voted “no”, we could return to the voters with a slightly different arrangement with Bethel and Royalton as “necessary” and Rochester as “advisable”. That change would require moving to a proportional arrangement for board membership, with 4 representatives from Royalton, 3 from Bethel, and 2 from Royalton.

We voted on the original plan on April 11. The vote was as follows:

	Yes	No
Bethel	320	67
Rochester	213	178
Royalton	203	462

The severity of the loss in Royalton was a major set back. Relationships were frayed and feelings were hurt. The degree of the rejection immediately caused citizens of Bethel, and particularly, Rochester to question the ability of these communities to join together in a single education district.

To capitalize on the progress already made and to hit the June 30 deadline for incentives, Bethel and Rochester came together as a subcommittee of the full committee, and put together what has come to be called “Plan B”, which called for those two towns to create a single district with an elementary program in each town, grades 7 and 8 delivered under a single program provided using facilities in both towns, and high school provided in a single school at Bethel. At the time, the committee members expressed concern that even with combining the high schools, the number of students was too small to be sustained over the long run. “Plan B” was seen as an interim step that would require the new district to re-think high school options within a year or two. “Plan B” was approved by the State Board on May 16. It called for a vote by the electorate after any reconsiderations were completed related to the original plan, but no later than September 30, 2017.

New Circumstances

Since we were last before the State Board on May 16, several things have changed which have caused us to return to you:

1. Royalton voters petitioned for reconsideration of the original vote. Following a concerted advocacy effort by that community, the June 13 reconsideration resulted in a strong favorable vote for the original plan on a vote of 317 “yes” and 248 “no”.
2. Rochester voters petitioned for reconsideration of the original vote. That vote took place on June 20 and resulted in a “no” vote with the tally of 144 “yes” votes and 236 “no” votes. The

process of conducting that new vote prompted new and intense conversations in Rochester, making quite clear that they are not likely to continue to embrace the original plan.

3. The Vermont Legislature passed Act 49 which extended the deadlines for incentives and created some new options.

Committee Recommendation and Future Direction

The committee met on July 6 to consider all of these issues. The committee considered two primary courses of action.

First, the committee could have invoked Article 13 of the original proposal and put before Bethel, Royalton, and Rochester a modified version with Bethel and Royalton being “necessary” and Rochester being “advisable”. Article 13 would require the board of a new district to be comprised proportionally rather than the “even representation/at-large model” of the original proposal. The committee chose not to invoke Article 13 for two reasons. A. The original proposals called for even numbers of representatives and there remains a strong commitment to that model over the proportional model. B. As an “advisable” district, it is likely that the Rochester Board would not put the original proposal back before the voters. But they would not be able to move forward with other options until all of the timeframes were exhausted by Bethel and Rochester, which could carry the process into November.

Second, the committee voted to recommend to the State Board revocation of its May 16 approval of “Plan B”. Over the past two months, boards and citizens in both Rochester and Bethel have softened their interest in “Plan B”, seeing it largely as a stop-gap approach that was developed in response to Royalton’s rejection of the original plan, and not really large enough to make a substantial educational difference nor to provide long-term financial sustainability. There were also substantial concerns expressed by parents about the fact that this plan would create two years of uncertainty for students and teachers, given the assumption that the joint high school may well be phased out.

THIS SECOND DECISION CONSTITUTES OUR REQUEST TO YOU. We are asking that you revoke your approval of our alternative plan that was approved on May 16. This would have the affect of dissolving our study committee and allowing the pursuit of other options within a very short timeframe.

Going Forward

The assumption at this point is that Rochester will immediately forge a new direction that they believe will meet the goals of the law and be acceptable to their electorate. They will have to act quickly in order to achieve results before November 30.

The committee recommends to the Royalton and Bethel School Boards that they immediately establish a new study committee which can develop a new plan for a two-town unified district. They will use the bulk of the previously developed plan. We hope that the State Board will see a new proposal from those two towns within the next month or two.

Thanks for your prompt assistance in this matter to allow timely action to hit the new deadlines established in Act 49.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Lisa Floyd", written in a cursive style.

Lisa Floyd, Chair
WRVSU PK-12 Operating Study Committee

ROCHESTER BOARD OF SCHOOL DIRECTORS
SPECIAL MEETING
WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 9, 2017 – (held after Stockbridge combined meeting)
Stockbridge School

Unapproved Minutes

Board Members Present: Frank Russell, Jeff Sherwin, Tony Goupee, Amy Wildt, Jessica Arsenault

Administration Present: Bruce Labs, Dani Stamm

Members of the Community: Joe Cahill, Megan Payne, Pat Harvey, Tim Pratt, Andy West, Chris Mattrick, Megan Novotny, Charity Colton, Jennifer Homa, Martha Slater, Kay Stringer, Joanne Mills, Earl Kingsbury, Marilyn Edgerton, Joe Pimental, Donna Gallant, Jenny Auston, Midge Scanlan, Char Gardner, Rob Gardner, Julie Groppe

Proceedings-

Meeting called to order at 8:00pm by Jeff Sherwin

Additions or Changes to the agenda Jeff motioned to remove reports from Principal and Superintendent as this is a special meeting and had specific action items to discuss. Jess seconded, so moved.

Tony made a motion to approve the following minutes, seconded by Frank-

Minutes of July 6, 2017 (Special)
Minutes of July 13, 2017 (Special)
Minutes of July 26, 2017 (Regular)

Board Communication Jess noted that there is still a need for someone to do minutes for Rochester meetings. This is a paid position.

Action Items

1. *Vote to allow 9-12 students to be tuitioned out for the 2017-2018 school year*
Jeff and Jess had recalled this already happened. Bruce had not seen the minutes yet and was not at the last meeting for this discussion. Action item recalled as this item was already voted on. Jess noted she will try to highlight these items in bold on future minutes.

2. *Vote to move that the Rochester Board ask the Vermont State Board of Education to revoke its May 16, 2017 approval of an amended plan and report dated May 4, 2017 for formation of the Bethel-Rochester Unified School District on the grounds that the Board has, upon its further consideration of the plan, determined that it is not in the best*

interests of the Rochester School District.

(This item got moved up) **Amy made the motion that the Rochester Board ask the Vermont State Board of Education to revoke its May 16, 2017 approval of an amended plan and report dated May 4, 2017 for formation of the Bethel-Rochester Unified School District on the grounds that the Board has, upon its further consideration of the plan, determined that it is not in the best interests of the Rochester School District. Jeff seconded, so moved.**

3. Discuss and vote on a plan to accommodate middle school students participating in athletics at Bethel for the 2017-2018 school year

Bruce proposed a plan to allow middle schoolers to play sports in Bethel. The number of students interested in middle school sports is not enough to field teams in Rochester, and the number could shrink as more kids have left. It was noted by Dani that it's important to offer sports at this age level. Board members agreed. Transportation would be provided to and from Bethel and the expense would be minimal as a bus driver for Bethel already makes the trip over to Bethel from Rochester every day. Rochester would not be charged for that daily trip. The bus is parked at Rochester school. To accommodate the time that the driver needs to leave school dismissal will be a little earlier, at 2:25pm. It was noted that at this time all games would be played in Bethel, however Amy thought maybe discussions could happen where some could be played in Rochester – to avoid scheduling conflicts. Parents have expressed they want their children on gender specific teams for this age group. Bethel is in favor of this plan and would pay for all field, uniform, and referee costs. Rochester kids would help them fill out their small teams. Amy and Jess both noted that there seems to be enough kids interested in Cross-country, yet it is not offered in Bethel. Can Rochester have a Cross-country team? Dani thought this was doable, Jess asked if Rochester could invite Bethel kids to be on this team and Dani agreed she would look into it. The coop agreement for high school sports would be the same except include basketball. Discussion about the need for an Athletic Director in Rochester took place. Both Amy and Jess thought it was essential to have a line of communication to help coordinate bussing, etc. Jess wondered if the board could agree to the sports coop for middle school and high school with Bethel now and then negotiate with the current AD in Rochester to see if he would stay on at reduced hours to help in this transition. Dani and Bruce thought that would be OK and would begin talking with the AD. **Amy made the motion to move forward with the middle school coop sports agreement with Bethel as outlined by Bruce, Jeff seconded, so moved.**

New Business **Jeff made a motion to accept the Rochester Food Service Coordinator's resignation that was submitted on August 1. Jess seconded, so moved.**

Executive Session **Jeff motioned to go into executive session at 8:35pm. Tony seconded, so moved. Exited at 9:15pm with the following action taken:**

The board supports a plan Dani has in place to accommodate middle school math until another teacher is found. The one that was attempted to be hired last month declined the position. Jeff motioned to increase the hours of the office assistant by 3 hours a week, Amy seconded, so moved.

Meeting motioned to adjourn at 9:20pm by Jess, seconded by Frank.

Minutes submitted by board clerk, Jessica Arsenault