

APPROVED MINUTES
MARLBORO ACT 46 ALTERNATIVE STRUCTURE COMMITTEE
February 9th, 2017 6:30 PM.

Present:

Alternative Structure Committee: Lauren Poster (Committee Chair) Doug Korb, (Chair, Marlboro School Board), Francie Marbury (Principal, Marlboro Elementary School)

Members of the public: Dan Mac Arthur, Lucy Gratwick, Ani Shaeffer, David Holzapfel, Peter Barus (recorder)

Open meeting

The meeting was convened at 6:35 PM.

Approve minutes from January 10th, 12th, 24th, 2017

After certain corrections:

Ms. Marbury moved to approve the minutes from January 10, 2017. Second by Ms. Poster. **All in Favor.**

Ms. Marbury moved to approve the minutes from January 12, 2017. Second by Ms. Poster. **All in Favor.**

Ms. Marbury moved to approve the minutes from January 24, 2017. Second by Mr. Korb. **All in Favor.**

Testimony before house and senate

(On January 25, 2017, Mr. Korb (Board Chair), Ms. Poster (Alternative Structure Committee Chair), and Mr. MacArthur (Marlboro School Board and Act 46 Dover/Marlboro/Wardsboro Study Committee) testified before the Vermont House Committee on Education, that Marlboro is being asked to vote March 7th on a merger that could close the Junior High before the rules for an Alternative Structure are finalized, and before the 5 towns in Leland and Gray vote on a new Unified Union District. Since an adverse vote would force exploration of the Alternative Structure without an approved K-12 Side, the current deadlines are untenable. They voiced support for HB15, which would provide additional time, and clarity on issues such as the Small Schools Grants. -pb¹)

Ms. Poster reported on a good session and press coverage of testimony at the State House on January 25; Ms. Marbury observed that other Towns were discussed as well. House Bills H7 and H15, and testimony with the House Education Committee on H15, were well received in the House; the Senate did not seem quite as receptive. There was discussion of this and about other districts where budgets have been severely impacted. Ms. Poster reported that the Senate took testimony from the Superintendent, CFO and a board member from Chittenden, now in the third year of their merger of six towns, excepting Huntington, and they cited savings of about \$300,000; they have about 2,600 students; their six schools, within 3-5 miles of each other on flat terrain, share students; and they have reduced teaching positions by one; the Act 46 merger did not address student outcomes, a large opiate addiction problem, or a continuing rise in special-needs pupils; this is the last year of the Incentives for them; next year's taxes will go up, and have risen two cents every year to date. There was discussion.

Brattleboro merger

Ms. Poster invited Mr. MacArthur to discuss the Brattleboro consolidation plans. He noted that Brattleboro votes in May, and if Marlboro votes against merger, there may be an option to sit in at the Windham South East Supervisory Union and think about ways to be an "Advisory", or other creative solutions; a received email had expressed support; on a union board Marlboro, would have one representative. He noted that the House Education Committee is now looking at making changes to Act 46; he will send updates to a 14-page document.

Mr. Korb cited similar information, and discussed whether a Side-by-Side would be allowed with Vernon, given the different structures; he noted Vernon is out of their SU; and also, discussed whether a Side-by-Side with Dummerston, k8, is possible. Mr. Korb read from the Education Committee's "tweaks" document; various combinations were discussed.

Ms. Poster Discussed being an "Advisory", as not having much to lose; Mr. Korb encouraged due diligence, and noted Brattleboro has not been very clear in communications about their merger, distributing a video apparently promoting a single course of action; he suggested keeping a distance. Ms. Poster noted the likely negative response to giving up choice, a loss of voice in the SU, and few expanding student opportunities there; Mr. MacArthur observed the possibility of a Side-by-Side with the entire Brattleboro district. Mr. Korb discussed other towns seeing disproportionate representation, etc., in

¹ State records [<http://legislature.vermont.gov/committee/document/2018/10/Date/1-25-2017>]

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some of the merger plans put forth. Ms. Gratwick asked about merging with Putney and Dummerston. Ms. Poster asked about keeping choice and being a Side with those Towns. Mr. Korb asked about regional choice. Ms. Marbury observed that this would be a lottery for a limited number of slots. Ms. Poster read from Act 129 on choice. Mr. MacArthur discussed dissidents in Putney and Dummerston, a Supervisory District including the Compass School. Ms. Poster asked what the Committee wishes to do about the idea of a Brattleboro merger. Mr. Korb suggested waiting until after the vote, and if it is negative, asking to sit in on their meetings to understand their Articles; Mr. MacArthur, alluding to possible Legislative modifications, suggested exploring further options, and due diligence on Brattleboro; he will draft a communiqué for consideration.

Preparing for February 13th Meeting

Ms. Poster reported that after the January Community meeting there were many notes from citizens. Mr. MacArthur had responded and reported that some answers were rejected, most accepted; and the Study Committee had listed the questions and responses on their blog. Ms. Shaeffer noted that people came to the meeting and did not stay for the vote; some had indicated lack of understanding of the issues; she discussed the presentation.

Ms. Poster brought some answers to questions raised at informational meetings:

Q: How much is tuition cost? A: Current state average is \$14,074.

Ms. Poster noted that this was not accurate and discussed per-pupil costs, insurance, tuition, Special Education, discussed finding an accurate number to answer such questions as in: “20 kids out of the school will cost this amount, losing JH would save this amount in the budget.”

Mr. MacArthur discussed the State formula for calculating per-pupil costs; Ms. Marbury reported that \$250,000 is about what JH costs in salary and benefits, including 25% Special Education; there are now 20 students, in some cases two sections (Spanish, PE); Ms. Poster observed this is about \$30,000 less than tuitioning out students; with less students it could be less expensive to tuition out; Ms. Marbury noted that five years out the projections hold at about the same numbers, averaging 16-24 JH students; Mr. MacArthur suggested a fulltime principal will not be necessary if there are fewer JH students, but tuitioning out will not save \$100,000. Ms. Marbury observed that much depends on which school a student tuitions goes out to, this could be very high;

Q: With 7th and 8th grades, are there any schools offering what is offered here? A: Similar experiential learning experiences available at some, but out of pocket for parents could be high after receiving State average reimbursement.

Ms. Poster commented that this should have been spelled out.

Q: How will the new district handle student days, etc.; A: all three schools would use the same schedule.

Ms. Marbury noted that this could increase expenses; she discussed negotiated teacher salaries, another area of rising costs.

Mr. Korb read from the AoE’s announced tuitions, noting that Brattleboro is higher than the State average.

Q: What prevents our school being closed later? A: Articles make clear, only a vote by the residents... unlikely that the Articles would be changed.

Ms. Poster reminded that this is preparation for the February 13th meeting, and inaccurate responses should have corrected. She discussed public concerns as expressed in the questions, reactions to informational meetings, and what to present clearly at the outset before opening up discussion on the 13th.

Ms. Poster discussed Marlboro’s listing as “geographically isolated”, noting that that Small Schools Grant may possibly be retained on that basis, contributing to a strong Alternative Structure proposal.

Mr. Korb discussed the need for an objective, informative presentation, with a report on the legislative visit. Mr. MacArthur summarized: a vote no gives a year for studying creative ways to proceed.

Ms. Shaeffer noted that the Study Committee presented the alternatives as “This is how it will go if you vote yes... this is how it will go if you vote no.” This Committee should present the real alternatives, which speak for themselves; “Geographic Isolation” should be highlighted. Mr. MacArthur recalled that the House Education Committee Chair had said,

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“If you were Geographically Isolated in 2011, and they haven’t changed the land, you are still Geographically Isolated,” and would not lose the Small Schools Grant. Ms. Shaeffer observed that “Geographically Isolated” and a No vote gives a year.

Ms. Gratwick suggested that the Study Committed session may break out into small groups.

The Warning was discussed, Front Porch Forum announcements, potential attendance. Ms. Poster cited the handout on tax rates, public misunderstanding of tax rates, projections with and without grants, merger, no merger, etc. She noted that knowing the present tax rate does not really indicate how it will change, and the public information needs to point out the distinction between “education tax” and the personal tax bill. For outreach on the vote the Warning will be posted online; she asked for a sense of the Committee for how a mailing should be done, whether individual letters, a group letter, or mass mailing. Ms. Marbury suggested better reception if individual voices are perceived, noting that one letter from a parent will come out before Town Meeting; the *Mixer* deadline is the 15th.

Mr. Korb discussed the importance of the Committee’s decision not to take a position; but asked about expressing an opinion in public. Ms. Shaeffer suggested presenting non-biased information about what is definitely known; Ms. Poster noted that the Committee’s analysis does not show definite savings with a merger.

Mr. MacArthur provided a draft letter from the Committee for consideration. There was discussion of who pays for the mailing.

Mr. Korb discussed conversation with the House Education Committee on “preferred structure” vs “alternative structure”.

Ms. Shaeffer discussed mailings, costs, the authoritative tone of a mailing from an official Committee as official information with members listed. There was discussion of how to present the accurate alternatives and impacts effectively.

Mr. Korb cited a forthcoming public letter from the Study Committee (excerpt):

"A 'No' vote means:

The proposed unified District will not replace the three district system currently in place. It will not mean that consolidation goes away. Act 46 mandates consolidation by 2018 or the State Agency of Education has the authority to consolidate us with whichever district they choose in 2019."

Mr. Korb objected to this language on the basis that it does not mention that in the law, “a necessary element in the Act 46 framework” is Alternative Structure. Ms. Shaeffer expressed concern that parts of the letter are misleading.

Ms. Poster noted that there are informal community meetings going on among friends and neighbors about Act 46; younger people see things differently; Ms. Marbury asked if there is a way to counter the inaccurate merger Study Committee information; Mr. MacArthur noted work on this; Ms. Poster suggested adding a bullet-point recognizing Alternative Structures, and making clear that a No vote means there is an additional year to address the issues.

Mr. Korb asked for suggestions about how to start the Informational meeting. In discussion, a Q&A session was suggested; ask the audience how much they understand; answer what they ask; provide five points in the format, “Vote this way, this happens, vote that way, that happens, and a merger is *not* required.

Mr. Holzapfel observed that it’s hard to find out what alumni are up to; Ms. Marbury discussed alumni being listed on honor rolls at BUHS.

Ms. Shaeffer discussed how to get the Study Committee to change their letter. Mr. Barus spoke about his impressions of “Alternative Structure”, coming as he had from no knowledge and learning slowly as Act 46 meetings progressed, noting a public predisposition to see the Alternative Structure Committee as a recalcitrant element deviating from the mainstream.

Mr. Korb discussed a letter to the Study Committee. Ms. Poster suggested that the Study Committee was focused primarily on merging, not on other real possibilities.

Ms. Marbury observed that it comes down to talking to people individually. Mr. Korb suggested that the agreement not to speak one’s own opinion as a Committee member is like a gag order.

Ms. Poster suggested that a corrective point has to be added to the Study Committee letter.

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Ms. Gratwick discussed a Senior Lunch, with good questions, lots of people.

Mr. Korb observed that Marlboro has several generations of families, graduates returning to send their children to the school.

Mr. Holzapfel noted that about 266 people will probably vote no, out of 700 or so registered voters in the Town, and discussed public impressions of the school. Ms. Poster reported conversation with a parent of child with special needs, saying teaching is improved for all when children with a personal teaching aid are included in the regular class.

Mr. Korb noted that Monday's Informational meeting will be visual, brief, with discussion. Ms. Poster noted that the Act 46 Study Ccommittee will tell what happens after a Yes vote, for the merger, and afterwards the Alternative Structure Committee will tell what happens after a No vote, against a merger. There was discussion; a No vote in Marlboro is different from a No in other Towns. Mr. Holzapfel urged citing the Act 46 implementation target of 2018.

There was further discussion of the language in the Study Committee's letter, of asking for revision, correction, noting that while the State does have authority to consolidate, there is a specific difference in Marlboro that does not apply to Dover and Wardsboro; the Study Committee sees a Yes vote as necessary; Alternative Structure is not fully understood as a real and viable possibility with real and significant advantages for Marlboro.

Mr. Korb and Ms. Poster will continue work on JH costs vs. Tuition, making the case for keeping the Junior High. Ms. Poster noted that the Alternative Structure Committee will send out an official letter, to go out with the brochure and money graph, containing language: "A no vote will..." to address the inaccuracies in the Study Committee letter.

There was discussion of a post card, bullet points.

Upcoming Meeting dates

- February 13th, 6:30PM, Act 46 Public Forum, Marlboro Elementary School

Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at 8:48PM.

Respectfully submitted, Peter Barus, recorder, February 11th, 2017.