

**SELECT BOARD
MINUTES WELLS TOWN
OFFICE
February 21, 2017**

PRESENT: Select Board: Paul Woodruff Jr., Tammy Holcomb
Also: Cherry Hopson, Joe Capron, Todd Fenton, Bill Rozinsky, Carole Duquette, Tracee Oakman Rupe, Sue Burke, Alex Brewster, Ron Dreher, Karen Holcomb, Andrea Rathbun, Richard Holcomb, Lisa Mattison, Ken Zlotnick

- 1 Meeting was called to order by Selectboard member, Paul Woodruff Jr. at 7:00PM.
- 2 Minutes of the meeting of the February 7th meeting were read and approved.
- 3 Bills were studied and discussed and orders were signed.
- 4 School board chair Sue Burke came to answer questions about Act 46 and the school merger. Ron Dreher asked about the debts of the towns involved. Sue Burke said Middletown has a debt of \$12,338.19. Wells has none. Lisa Mattison said if Wells votes no, Wells will not be in the new district unless the state assigns them there. Sue Burke said the Wells School will not be closed if the merger occurs. Rich Holcomb said there is no guarantee of that after five years. Ron asked about tax rates. Lisa said Wells tax rate will increase by \$80 per \$100,000. Increased tuitions will pay a part in that. Ron said he understood Act 46 was to save money but it doesn't. Ron asked about choice. Sue Burke said a student in grades 7-12 could go to any school in Vermont and the tuition paid by the town will be based on the state average. Sue said designation is not possible under the new district. Lisa said the law would have to be modified to allow designation of Granville, NY. Ron Dreher said Rupert has a tuition agreement with Salem, NY. Ron asked about transportation. Lisa said transportation policies will be determined by the new board and supervisory union. Tracee Oakman Rupe said she disagreed with some of what was being said. She discussed the designation agreement with Granville, NY and she said without it Poultney, VT has no incentive to keep tuition costs down. She said the choice model in the merger is projected to add \$250,000 in costs. Lisa Mattison said the elementary school costs would have to be lowered some to compensate for additional tuition increases. Tracee asked how the costs would be divided. Would it be by student population or grand list? Either way Wells would pay a lot more. Tracee asked why Wells didn't do what Ira did. Sue said the state demanded a merger. Tracee said the smalls school grant isn't a major argument for the merger as it could go away at any time, and Wells best choice would be to do nothing. Tracee asked about supervisory union representation. Sue Burke said our voting power will be less. Ron Dreher said Wells will have one representative out of fifteen. Tracee said Wells should be a stand-alone. Bill Rozinsky expressed concern about the new tuition rates as compared to Granville's rates. Tracee said we have the best deal imaginable because of the designation with Granville, NY. Lisa spoke about educational opportunities, which she believes would be enhanced by the merger. Ron said we are looking at 32% increase. Bill Rozinsky spoke about incentives to go to Granville, NY. Cherry Hopson asked about an exit strategy to get out of the new district. Sue and Lisa said there is none. They said there was a study on stand-alone which they did not find desirable. Cherry asked about school configuration, which could occur in one year. Lisa

and Sue said the new board would have to decide about that. Rich said there would be some savings in eliminating some supervisory positions. Tammy asked about ownership of school properties. Lisa said it wouldn't change for 15 months. Alex Brewster said a merger would happen anyways and he was concerned about losing incentives. Tracee discussed the process of the state would use if the merger was voted down. She said the \$85,000 grant could disappear at any time. The incentives for each year would be lost as well with a no vote and the state could still force us to merge. Cherry said the \$85,000 was insignificant and there would be no increased educational opportunities; therefore, there was no reason to vote yes. Cherry stated that anyone that voted yes for this, must be idiots. Alex Brewster said the minutes must give an accurate representation of what was said. The board said the meeting was being recorded and Cherry said the minutes were subject to approval by the Board. Bill Rozinsky asked about different diplomas given by Granville and other schools. Joe Capron asked about paperwork to be brought to Thursdays meetings regarding ownership of the school and MWA properties. The matter is being researched.

- 5 Todd Fenton said any building that is an education center must have both smoke and CO detectors. He said the MWA no longer has a contract with the Red Cross but the school does.
- 6 Tracee Oakman Rupe said the Delaney Committee is sending out a survey and she asked everyone to respond.
- 7 Dave Ricard wants a new grader scarified at \$5400 and guard rails at \$48.00 a piece. He would also like to get 10 pallets of chloride at the special rate of \$13.93 per bag.
- 8 The March 7th meeting will be at 6:45 PM.
- 9 Board received the check for the spare sander contract.
- 10 The town reports have been mailed.
- 11 Alex Brewster spoke about the electrical work at the library and he passed out information. He wants to replace the current panel and to do other work described in the handout. The costs will come out of the \$6,000 budget. He also wants a fire alarm system. The improvements he wants should come to approximately \$5,000. Tammy suggested the possibility of getting other quotes. Board wanted more time to make a decision. Alex said the library board of Trustees approved the work he is suggesting.
- 12 Todd Fenton praised the maintenance of the cemetery.
- 13 Tammy made a motion to adjourn at 9:17 PM. 2nd by Paul, passed unanimously.

Paul Woodruff Jr.

Tammy Holcomb

Minutes
from the School
Board Secretary

**Town of Wells Selectboard
Regular Meeting
February 21, 2017
7:00 p.m.**

Minutes (Subject to Approval)

PRESENT: Selectboard: Paul Woodruff, Jr., Tammy Holcomb

Guests: Cherry Hopson, Joe Capron, Todd Fenton, Bill Rozinsky, Carole Duquette, Tracee Oakman Rupe, Sue Burke, Alex Brewster, Ron Dreher, Karen Holcomb, Andrea Rathbun, Richard Holcomb, Lisa Mattison, Ken Zlotnick

1. **Call to Order:** The meeting was called to Order by Selectman Woodruff at 7:00 p.m.
2. **Approval Of Minutes:** The minutes of the February 7, 2017 meeting were read, and no revisions were noted. The Board approved the minutes.
3. **Approval of Bills:** The Board reviewed and approved the bills.
4. **Approval of Payroll:** The Board reviewed and approved the payroll.
5. **Act 46 Open Forum:** Sue Burke, Chair of the Wells Village School Board, introduced herself, as well as Lisa Mattison, Principal of Wells Village School. Sue indicated she and Lisa were available to answer questions regarding the RWSU-RCSU Act 46 Merger proposal, and Lisa offered handouts, which have been available at the transfer station, for anyone interested, along with the Articles of Agreement and a financial summary. Lisa also indicated that Act 46 is extremely complex, which is why she and Sue make themselves available to answer community questions, so that everyone can have a sound understanding of the requirements of Act 46, as well as the RWSU-RCSU Act 46 Merger Proposal.

The first comment from the audience suggested that the requirements of Act 46 are unconstitutional. He challenged the operation of Act 46, and expressed frustration. He then queried debt levels of the various schools involved in the RWSU-RCSU Act 46 proposal, and Sue provided the current debt level for Middletown Springs, indicating that Wells currently has no debt.

The audience then asked about potential closure of the Wells Village School, and both Lisa and Sue reported that the school is protected against closure of the school by the Articles of Agreement.

Relative to financials, there were questions regarding tax rates, and information on the projected impacts was provided. Lisa explained that Wells' tax rate is projected to increase by eight cents over the course of the merger transition. Audience members then did a "deep dive" into projected impacts on tax rates.

The audience sought to understand the impact of Act 46 on school choice. There was an extensive discussion on this issue, touching on school choice under the new paradigm, as well as associated costs. Sue indicated that students in grades 7-12 can go to any school in Vermont, and tuition for public school will be at the public cost. For private schools, tuition will be based on the State average. There was an extensive discussion on this issue, with concerns raised over students who wish to attend high school in New York (i.e. Granville), which would require a change in the law. One audience member posited that some provisions of Act 46 might be unconstitutional. The issue of transportation was also discussed, with Lisa indicating that transportation policies will be determined by the new Supervisory Union Board.

School choice was a key topic of discussion, with extensive dialogue regarding projected tuition costs for high school students, designation, the current ability of school boards to send students to schools of their choice. Discussion then transitioned to debt levels, with audience members seeking to understand how debt will be distributed across all participating schools. Sue explained that, during the Transition Period, all merging schools will be melding financials, which, in the case of Wells, may mean that taxes increase.

Audience member questions turned to transportation, with Sue and Lisa explaining that this will be a Supervisory Union function, which will be determined by the new SU Board once it is in place. This transitioned discussion to the new SU Board, and how representation will be determined on the new Board. Lisa and Sue both answered that, per the Articles of Agreement, representation will be by population as of the last census.

Concerns continued to be voiced regarding the potential for costs to increase, with audience members expressing frustration, given that Wells Village School has been extremely successful in providing high quality, affordable education to its students. Lisa shared that the RSWSU-RCSU Study Committee conducted extensive analyses on this issue, and overall, the study concluded that there are increased educational opportunities for students. However, others expressed concern regarding potential increased costs, and the burden that could place on local families.

Relative to high schools, Sue and Lisa discussed that students and their families decide where to attend school, and there are different opportunities at both schools.

Audience members queried a number of issues, including an "exit strategy" for the Act 46 merger, based upon the assumption that the merger is unconstitutional and/or unworkable, the scenarios examined by the Act 46 Study Committee in developing the proposal for merger, and the interplay between Vermont and New York. Next, audience members sought to understand the Articles of Agreement as they pertain to the powers of the future school board, with Sue and Lisa explaining the development of those articles to ensure that future school boards have the decision-making power they need.

Efficiencies of the proposed merger were also discussed, with Lisa broadly outlining the savings that will be achieved through combining two Supervisory Unions into one, as well as enhanced opportunities for students.

Audience members posited the potential for conducting a "Self Study", rather than moving forward with the RSWSU-RCSU Merger Proposal. Both Sue and Lisa cautioned that this could result in decreased educational opportunities and increased costs, and they were not certain whether Wells could continue to be a member of RSWSU, or what the penalties would be for failing to meet the requirements of the law. Nonetheless, audience members argued against the proposition that Act 46 will "enhance educational opportunities", characterizing the law as an "awful proposal".

They then engaged in a passionate discussion of voter participation, positing that voters will not be interested in information, and will simply "vote no". The group talked about the potential downsides, and Lisa noted that law specifies that the State can dictate which districts will be forcibly merged, and tax penalties will be imposed.

Lisa expressed faith in the citizens of all districts involved to be able to discern the benefits of the merger proposal, as well as the financial and operational downsides of the State stepping in to dictate school combinations that towns do not want and may not make reasonable fiscal sense.

One member of the audience demanded that the minutes be an accurate representation of discussion, seeking assurance that the recording would not be erased. Those assurances were provided.

Additional discussion then occurred regarding diplomas. Sue explained that there are six diplomas awarded in New York, three of which are equivalent to a Vermont high school diploma. Lisa provided further detail on the breakdown of New York diplomas, some of which do not rise to the level of a GED. Sue added that Poultney's graduation rates are much higher.

Two final issues were discussed, as follows:

1. Who holds the title to the property Wells Village School is on,
2. What is the potential impact to Wells Village School of losing the \$85,000 Small Schools Grant, given that one audience members characterized a loss of that grant as "insignificant".