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Minutes for the Monday, August 22, 2016
South Hero Act 46 PreK-8 Exploratory Sub-Committee
Meeting at Folsom Education & Community Center

Called to Order

- Meeting called to order at 6:05pm by Melanie Henderson, Sub-Committee Board Chair

In attendance

Melanie Henderson, Jen Lyon, Bentley Vaughan, Board members; Melissa Hood, Tim Maxham, Kari Banas, Bill Banas, Liese Boissevain

Sub-Committee Discussion:

Reviewed the Data Sources

Melanie Henderson presented the sub-committee's research on Vermont's unmerged PreK-8 school districts:

- There are currently 49 unmerged PreK-8 school districts
- For each town, the following information was gathered:
 - Equalized Tax Rate
 - Driving time from South Hero (minutes)
 - Overall Proficiency of 7th & 8th Graders in All subjects (averaged from the 2015 SBAC's and 2012 NECAP's)
 - World Language Offerings
- For each criteria, data sources and analysis process was described
- For each criteria, the towns were the sorted
 - From lowest to highest for Tax Rate and Driving Time
 - From highest to lowest for Overall Proficiency
 - Simple Yes or No for World Language
- The Top 25 schools were selected from each criteria
- Schools that appeared in the Top 25 for all 4 criteria were marked green, including Georgia, Barre Town, and Walden
- Schools that appeared in the Top 25 for 3 out of the 4 criteria were marked blue, including Barre City, Montgomery, Lowell, Orwell, Irasburg, Benson, Coventry, Orleans ID, Strafford, Barton ID, Castleton/Hubbardton Union, Rutland Town, and Lunenburg
- The green and blue towns were shown on a map, and the towns with the most potential were identified (Montgomery, Orwell, and Georgia)

In addition, some data was gathered on the Georgia school district in response to concerns voiced by the school board.

- Concern: Georgia may choose to absorb South Hero's 7th & 8th Graders, making South Hero into a PreK-6 school
 - Currently, Georgia's student-teacher ratio is ≤ 22 . If South Hero's 7th & 8th graders were moved to the Georgia school, the new student-teacher ratio would be ≥ 26 for some classes.

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- To reduce the student-teacher ratio to a more manageable size, Georgia would have to add at least one 7th grade teacher and classroom.
- Conclusion: While this concern should be addressed in any conversations with Georgia, it seems unlikely that this is an immediate risk, since teachers and classrooms are already available in South Hero.
- Concern: Georgia is a much bigger town. Therefore, South Hero would have a much smaller representation on a combined school board.
 - Based on the 2010 census numbers, South Hero's population is 1,631, and Georgia's population is 4,515. The combined population would be 6,146
 - South Hero would be 26.5% of a combined population. Therefore, we would likely have two members out of a 7- or 8-member School Board
 - By comparison, if South Hero were to merge with Grand Isle, Isle la Motte, and North Hero, we would have 3 members of an 8-member School Board
 - School board members from the same town do not always vote in concert. Therefore, merging with a large town does not guarantee that South Hero's voice will be drowned out. On the flip side, small towns sometimes DO band together, as they did at the August 10th Act 46 meeting. (South Hero asked to delay the merger proposal, but the committee members from GI, ILM & NH voted unanimously to put the question on the November ballot.) Therefore, merging with several small towns does not guarantee that South Hero will be influential.
 - Conclusion: Whether South Hero merges with several small towns or one large town, we will still be a small town! As such, our representation in any merger will be relatively small. Therefore, relative size should not deter us from a merger that would benefit the town and school.

Next Steps

- Melanie Henderson will start to examine the various dovetailing education laws in depth, so that we can truly understand our options. Melanie will also do research to better understand the Joint Contract arrangements.
- Melanie Henderson will research technology options to facilitate remote meetings.
- Jen Lyon will research the failed Franklin Northeast merger (including Montgomery, Bakersfield, and Berkshire), to understand why it failed.
- Jen Lyon will determine which Vermont town successfully removed itself from a merger study
- Bentley Vaughan will research the towns surrounding St. Johnsbury and Barnet
- Melissa Hood volunteered to research the failed Addison-Rutland merger (including Orwell, Benson, and Castleton/Hubbardton), to understand why it failed.
- Kari Banas volunteered to research the failed Orleans Central merger (including Irasburg, Orleans ID, and Barton) to understand why it failed. Also volunteered to research the Jay/Westfield school district to understand how they work
- Beth Curtis volunteered to research Barre Town and Barre City's proposed merger

Public Comments:

- Jen Lyon wondered whether the State really intends to force a top-rated school (like South Hero) to change its structure?

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- Melissa Hood wondered whether the State would make an exception for South Hero joining the Islands merger AND keeping our structure, since we are a top-rated school
- Bentley Vaughan asked if we should pursue a legislative change to allow South Hero to join the Islands merger at a later date and still receive the incentives
- Tim Maxham suggested collecting the towns that are unhappy with Act 46, and approaching the State collectively.
- Melanie Henderson asked whether we could research which towns may be ready. Liese Boissevain suggested that many towns may simply be waiting for someone to take the lead.
- Tim Maxham suggested that lawmakers such as Karl Rosenquist(?), who have expressed concern over Act 46, may be willing to help. Kari Banas also suggested contacting Ben Joseph, who expressed concern with Act 46 at the Grand Isle Democratic Candidate forum.
- Jen Lyon also suggested inviting the gubernatorial candidates to visit South Hero and hear our concerns. Melanie Henderson suggested asking one of the central Vermont towns to host a candidate forum on Act 46, to allow many towns to participate
- Tim Maxham would like South Hero (and the State) to understand how limited our options are because of the distance between South Hero and the other unmerged PreK-8 towns
- Kari Banas suggested that if the Islands merger fails, we can still fight for the non-preferred PK6/PK8 merger and also the incentives
- Bill Banas stated that if the other Island towns have made up their minds to focus on PreK-6, then we need to move on and find a PreK-8 option that will work for South Hero.
- Melissa Hood offered to help research, but was concerned that LCATV may not cover towns beyond Western Vermont. However, Act 46 meeting minutes can be found online, and other towns can be interviewed
- Melanie Henderson reminded the group that when contacting other towns, we cannot say that we "represent South Hero"...simply that we are South Hero residents seeking information
- Liese Boissevain was concerned that since Barre City & Town are more urban communities, with very different needs, they may not be suitable merger partners
- Jen Lyon mentioned a VT Digger article that discusses mergers that passed and failed. She recalls one town that successfully removed itself from its study committee, and offered to research how (and why) they did it.
- Tim Maxham believes that if the Islands merger proposal fails, the Islands Act 46 Study Committee will have more time to make another attempt. He believes the existing committee would have until ~Jan. 2019.
- Melissa Hood mentioned that new committee members may be elected if an initial proposal fails.
- Bill Banas believes that the Islands Act 46 Study Committee would dissolve after November. This would free South Hero to pursue other merger options.
- Melissa Hood stated that she hoped a Georgia merger could work. She mentioned that many of Georgia's students are choosing academic quality over proximity when selecting a high school.
- Bill Banas mentioned that Georgia is concerned that their 8th graders' may require more academic preparation, and are planning to investigate.

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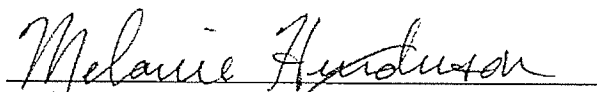
- Bill Banas stated that the Franklin West Act 46 committee is considering three options: a) building a new High School for Georgia/Fletcher/Fairfax, b) pursuing a side-by-side merger with Georgia alone, or c) doing nothing. He stated that there is lots of information on Georgia's website!
- Bentley Vaughan expressed an interest in knowing more about the various merger options, including the more obscure options (such as Joint Contract mergers).
- Bentley Vaughan wondered about next steps. Melissa Hood suggested that we attend Georgia's next School Board meeting (Sept. 6th) and gauge their direction. Then ask the South Hero School Board to approach Georgia. She suggested that South Hero request 1-2 Advisory seats on their Act 46 board (as they once offered)
- Kari Banas suggested we ask the South Hero school board to consider appointing a member of the PreK-8 sub-committee to the Advisory seat
- Melissa Hood wondered when the next Franklin West (Georgia/Fletcher/Fairfax) Act 46 study committee meeting is. Answer: Sept. 1st, 5:30 – 7:30pm at Georgia School Library

Adjournment

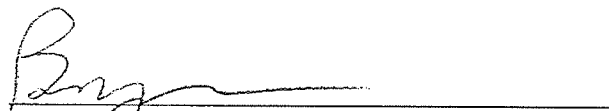
- Meeting was adjourned at 8:00pm by Melanie Henderson

Next Meeting Date:

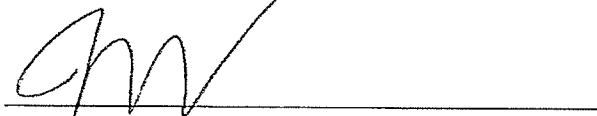
- TBD, based on progress of school board members



Melanie Henderson



Bentley Vaughan



Jen Lyon