

# Farmington River Regional School District

## School Committee - Special Meeting

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Meeting #445

Farmington River Elementary School Library

Monday, February 26, 2024

MINUTES

6:30 PM

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**Members Present:** Melissa Bye, Deb Fogel, Denise Hardie, Carol Lombardo, Phil Magovern, Douglas Miner, Carl Nett

**Also Present:** Tim Lee (via Zoom), Caroline Stamm

I. **Call to Order:** The meeting was called to order at 6:30 PM by Denise Hardie.

A. **Roll Call:** Melissa Bye, Deb Fogel, Denise Hardie, Carol Lombardo, Phil Magovern, Douglas Miner, Carl Nett

II. **Rationale/Preview of Meeting:**

- *Historical review / Changes of the past years / Current potential sustainability issues related to cost apportionment.*

A. Denise presented a brief history of the formation of the Regional District, as well as an overview of changes within the district that have resulted in this gathering - namely the financial sustainability of the district. She also noted the steps that brought the concern to the table, the response from the School Committee, as well as the goal of addressing the town assessment model.

B. The goal of the night is to review the facts and data pertaining to the sustainability of the district, and the School Committee will conclude if the data is credible and relevant, consider if there is other data to consider, and come to a consensus on conclusions that can be drawn from the data to determine what the next steps of the Committee are.

III. **Public Comment and Questions:**

A. There was no public comment at this time.

IV. **Data and Facts: FY24 cost apportionment:**

A. Denise reviewed the Financial Sustainability Document prepared by Carl Nett in collaboration with Denise and Timothy Lee.

B. **Otis and Sandisfield: Valuation and Income**

1. The Committee reviewed the equalized evaluation and the assessment calculation worksheet for the two towns. They also reviewed the current assessment methodology and the equalized valuations of both towns since 1992.

C. **Otis and Sandisfield: Combined effort yield**

1. Combined Effort Yield is the metric that DESE uses to identify how much a town should be able to afford for its public education.

D. **Otis and Sandisfield: Percentage tax levy to school district**

1. The Committee reviewed the FY24 Tax Levy and FRRSD Assessment for both towns. They also reviewed the Average Single Family Tax Bill, Income Per Capita, and the average tax bill percentage of income for both towns as well as compared to neighboring towns.

E. Just prior to the meeting, the Committee received new information from Brandi Page, Otis Town Manager, with information on the towns' tax levy. They will review this

information at an upcoming meeting since it was not on the agenda for tonight.

**V. Public Comment and Questions:**

- A. Sue Brofman, RAAC Member, expressed interest in hearing the information from Brandi as it pertains to the burden on Otis. Since this is new data, it will not be presented tonight, but would be on a future agenda.
  1. Douglas Miner confirmed with Brandi that the source of the information is the Department of Revenue, so it is the same source as the information that Carl pulled for this report.
- B. MOTION: Douglas Miner made a motion that the School Committee accept the facts and data presented as credible and relevant to a discussion of district financial sustainability. Melissa Bye seconded the motion.
  1. Discussion continued to explain that this is for the purpose of dissolving any disbelief or mistrust in the sources of data presented for the discussion. There was also clarification that this is to establish credibility in this source, but the discussion is open to other sources of information to be brought forward.
  2. MOTION TO AMEND: Carl Nett made a motion to amend Douglas' initial motion to state that they "will revise with the new data from FY24 as it becomes available". Phil Magovern seconded the motion.
  3. There was clarification that as the FY25 data becomes available, it will also be updated in the document.
  4. Discussion echoed that this initial motion is intended to accept the credibility of the data coming from the state as there has been a history of the district not accepting data from the state as credible.
  5. VOTE TO AMEND: Melissa Bye, Deb Fogel, Denise Hardie, Phil Magovern, Douglas Miner, and Carl Nett voted in favor. Carol Lombardo opposed. The motion passed 6-1 to amend Douglas' initial motion to state that they "will revise with the new data from FY24 as it becomes available".
  6. NEWLY REVISED MOTION: Douglas made a motion that the School Committee accept this data presented as factual, accurate, relevant, and credible and will revise with the new data from FY24 as it becomes available.
  7. Kathy Jacobs, Sandisfield town member, voiced concern that this statement now limits the data to FY24, and if this discussion progresses till FY25 data is available, it will limit the use of this new data.
  8. MOTION TO AMEND: Denise Hardie made a motion to amend Douglas' motion to replace the previous amendment to now state "will revise using the most up to date information as it is available." Carl Nett seconded the motion.
  9. VOTE TO AMEND: Melissa Bye, Deb Fogel, Denise Hardie, Phil Magovern, Douglas Miner, and Carl Nett voted in favor. Carol Lombardo opposed. The motion passed 6-1 to amend Douglas' initial motion to now state "will revise using the most up to date information as it is available."
  10. NEWLY REVISED MOTION: Douglas made a motion that the School Committee accept this data presented as factual, accurate, relevant, and credible and will revise using the most up-to-date information as it is available.
  11. VOTE TO ACCEPT: Melissa Bye, Deb Fogel, Denise Hardie, Carol Lombardo, Phil Magovern, Douglas Miner, and Carl Nett voted in favor. The motion passed

unanimously to accept this data presented as factual, accurate, relevant, and credible and will revise using the most up to date information as it is available.

**VI. School Committee Discussion**

- A. The Discussion continued to consider/brainstorm other sources of information that would be relevant to this discussion on District Financial Sustainability.
1. Heidi Utenis, Otis town member, voiced that it would be helpful to see how these changes would affect an individual's tax bill directly.
  2. Susan Ebitz, Otis town member, asked if there are any other towns or school regions that have this type of discrepancy in their town evaluations and if there are, how are they addressing it?
    - a) Denise and Carl spoke with DESE last week and they shared that there are a few other districts that use different apportionment methods for assessing towns (such as Manchester Essex School District)
  3. Phil has looked at other Regional Agreements on their apportionment methods and noted that it would be helpful to consider looking at.
  4. Douglas noted that in looking at other districts, we should also consider looking at districts that only have one building as a comparison. Jon Sylbert, Sandisfield Town Manager, noted that this may be difficult to find a direct comparison.
  5. Brandi voiced a concern about the use of the word "discrepancy" as it is misleadingly implying that there is a mistake. Denise clarified that her use of the word is in reference to the differences in relative wealth between the towns.
- B. Conclusions from Data and Facts:
1. MOTION: Carl Nett made a motion that the School Committee conclude from this data that as the district is currently constructed and operating, it is not financially sustainable into the future. Douglas Miner seconded the motion.
    - a) There was a discussion on how this can be concluded this early in the process and they would want to draw this conclusion if the data may change and as new data is presented.
    - b) The Committee discussed the impact of population changes in the towns, including changes in student enrollment at the school.
    - c) MOTION WITHDRAWAL: Carl withdrew his motion, and Douglas withdrew his second of the motion.
  2. MOTION: Carl Nett made a motion that the School Committee draw the following conclusion from this data: the School Committee should consider changes to the apportionment methodology aimed to improve the financial sustainability of the district into the future. Douglas Miner seconded the motion.
    - a) Denise invited Tim to weigh in on the Districts' financial sustainability.
    - b) Tim brought up a need for a common definition of what "unsustainable" means. He also voiced that if we are gathering more evidence, that we should consider gathering qualitative data on the impact of these changes, such as:
      - What the current financial conditions mean for the towns?
      - Are there town services at risk of or are not currently being provided?
      - What would be the burden on families if the tax burden is higher?
    - c) Additionally, Tim commented on a few impacts on the District should the numbers continue in this pattern and we would lose a partner town.

- d) Denise asked Jon Sylbert if there have been any loss of services in Sandisfield. Jon provided a brief, informal overview of the context and status of the town.
  - e) Sue Brofman voiced a concern that if we change the apportionment method, we would be in the same place in a few years. Denise addressed this noting that whatever is put into place would work for both towns and be sustainable into the future.
  - f) Douglas Miner clarified that what we are discussing is a need for change, not necessarily what the change is just yet. The discussion continued around the minimum contribution of the towns, foundation budget vs. actual budget, and the DESE requirements of the apportionment method.
  - g) VOTE TO ACCEPT: Melissa Bye, Deb Fogel, Denise Hardie, Phil Magovern, Douglas Miner, and Carl Nett voted in favor. Carol Lombardo opposed. The motion passed 6-1 that the School Committee draw the following conclusion from this data: the School Committee should consider changes to the apportionment methodology aimed to improve the financial sustainability of the district into the future.
- C. Next steps: Denise invited anyone who has ideas for data to consider, or who has questions on the material presented/the financial sustainability to reach out.
- 1. Next steps for the Committee would be:
    - a) Continue to work on withdrawal amendment of the RDA, as well as the apportionment of costs to the towns.
    - b) Create a revised RDA - along with the recommendations from the RAAC on other amendments to the RDA.
    - c) The amended RDA would go to DESE for preliminary approval, and then would go to town meetings for vote.
    - d) If both towns vote in favor of the amendments, the amended RDA would go to the Commissioner for final approval and into effect for the next year.
  - 2. This would be a tight turn-around for the town meetings: Sandisfield = May 18th, 2024 & Otis = May 21st, 2024

**VII. Public Comment and Questions:**

- A. Barb Cormier, Sandisfield town member, voiced that it is a delight to hear from Committee members who are fair and are willing to listen to both sides of the story.
- B. Cecily Goulange, Sandisfield town member, PTA President, and FRES parent, urged the Committee, town officials, and members of both towns to put themselves into the shoes of the parents of this district. The data, while helpful, doesn't tell you what it's like to walk into the school and see the tight-knit classrooms and community. She urged that if we don't find a solution, to think about the impact it would have on our students' education.

**VIII. Adjournment:**

- A. Phil Magovern made the motion to adjourn the meeting at 8:30 PM.
- B. Carl Nett seconded the motion.
- C. Vote - Roll Call: Melissa Bye, Deb Fogel, Denise Hardie, Carol Lombardo, Phil Magovern, Douglas Miner, Carl Nett

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Respectfully submitted,  
Caroline Stamm