

THETFORD TOWN SCHOOL DISTRICT
Tuesday, April 12, 2016
Thetford Elementary School

APPROVED MINUTES

Shannon Darrah convened the meeting at 7:01 p.m.. The following were present: Charlie Buttrey, Shannon Darrah, Erin Sterner, Kristen Downey, School Board; Kevin Petrone, TES Principal

PUBLIC PRESENT: Stuart Rogers, Tim Briglin, Ben Williams, Bob Wells, Ted Gaine, Julie Corcoran, Tami Musty, Patricia Smith, Dan Grossman, Dana Grossman, Ted MacVeagh, Katherine Milligan, Rain Flanagan, Francine A'ness, John Walker, Alexis Sargent, Amy Woodward, Nick Reo, Donna Steinberg, Jessica Eaton, Bill Huff, Priscilla Hall, Sally Eshleman, Peter Thompson, Thelma Thompson, Tara Durkee, Sara Ecker, Curtis Richardson, Bill Bugg, Sue Rogers, Nancy Vaughan, Maureen Burford, Diana Kimball-Anderson, Scot Zens, Rebecca Yukica, Christine Perron, Kevin Perron, Mike Pepe, Don Longwell, Sean Mullen

AGENDA REVIEW: Agenda approved with amendments.

MINUTES REVIEW: Postponed.

REVIEW AND APPROVAL OF ORDERS: Postponed.

PUBLIC COMMENT/CORRESPONDENCE: None

REVIEW OF SURVEY RESULTS FOR PUBLIC FORUM AND ONLINE SURVEY

BOARD DISCUSSION AND EVALUATE OPTIONS: Sterner reviewed the online survey results, referring to a handout which was identical to her powerpoint presentation. At the March 22 Act 46 forum, 150 attendees participated in a sticker poll using green, yellow, and red stickers to indicate their first, second, and unacceptable preferences for Act 46 compliance options.

308 residents participated in an online Google survey, which was open from March 22 - April 4. The Board recognized taking the survey may have been difficult for those with no computer access. The deadline to publish the survey in the town newsletter had passed. In the future the Board will make an effort to make a paper survey available.

Each of the online survey questions and answers was reviewed.

Question 1: Who are you? Respondents could respond to multiple fields. There was a wide range of respondents including students.

Question 2: Thetford Act 46 options. The choices were the same as at the forum. The

forum poll results leaned more heavily toward creating an alternate structure, with a merger with Strafford close behind. The option of maintaining the current structure had very little interest, and had the highest number of votes categorized as not acceptable. The online survey indicated more interest in a merger with Strafford (highest number of first choice votes and fewest unacceptable votes). There was a little more interest in keeping the current structure.

Question 3: Designation vs. Choice The online survey and the forum poll indicated the strongest preference for designation.

Question 4: (not asked at the forum): High school preference (TA, Rivendell, Hartford, Oxbow) Thetford is not allowed to designate a school that does not accept all categories of special education students, which excludes Sharon. Hanover High School was excluded because it is in NH. Thetford Academy was by far the first choice. Oxbow High School received the most 4th choice votes.

Question 5: (not asked at the forum): Potential Partners (Strafford, Sharon, Rivendell, Tunbridge, Stockbridge) Strafford was the strong preference, receiving the most strongly in favor votes. As geographic distance increased, preference decreased. Concerns regarding travel time and unfamiliarity with the cultures of towns like Stockbridge and Tunbridge likely contributed to those towns being ranked as the last choices.

Buttrey invited questions from the public.

Q: If one attended the forum could the same person do the online survey? Yes.

Q: It was strange to ask a question about preference for choice vs. designation without specifying the designation choices. It was not a fair question, and therefore the answers should be questioned.

Q: Was there any mechanism built into the online survey to prevent one person from replying many times? Also, at the forum each person was given a limited number of stickers. Sterner responded there was no such mechanism. The honor system was relied on.

Q: Is there any more information about the specifics of an alternate structure? It is too early to have details. Discussion followed.

Q: Which were the strongest responses for compliance with Act 46 from the forum? Buttrey responded that a merger with Strafford received the most online survey replies. Sterner added that each person at the forum was given 3 stickers, whereas online one could rank each of the 5 choices.

Buttrey stated he attended a recent meeting at Stockbridge. Strafford had a forum a week later than Thetford's and used the same sticker preference system. There were six options and the second choice was a merger with Thetford. Their first choice was an alternate structure. Whatever Strafford wants to do, they want to do it with Thetford, and Thetford with them. The study group with Norwich, Sharon and Strafford has been ongoing for the last 5-6 months, meeting twice per month. Norwich has dropped out. At the last meeting Strafford proposed a study group for an alternate structure with Sharon, Strafford, Thetford, and Tunbridge. But then there was a meeting at Stockbridge with Tunbridge,

Sharon, and Strafford. At that meeting Strafford repeated the idea of a four district study group for an alternate structure. The benefit is the schools do not have to merge and Strafford can keep 7/8. There appears to be some reluctance from Sharon, as some of their Board members want to stay in their SU. Tunbridge is not as far along in their process. Once a district is in a study group, it is exclusively in that study group. Meanwhile, Stockbridge wants to be included. TTSD has no relationship with Stockbridge and is not geographically close to them, but Tunbridge wants Stockbridge included in discussions. It has become a five town group including Tunbridge and Stockbridge. It is not clear yet if the AOE would approve of this group because of geographical discontinuity and because Tunbridge and Stockbridge would have to merge. Preliminarily, this group is exploring Hartland's interest. Hartland is a K-8 with choice, so they would fit with the three other districts. Bugg added that Hartland has a history with TA, with 15 students attending this year and 20 expected next year. Buttrey hopes for a statement soon from the Board about how Thetford will configure with Strafford, and hopes that Strafford will do the same. This would allow the other districts know that Thetford and Strafford have decided to work together. Within a few weeks decisions will be made by these other schools, which may inform Thetford's decision.

Dana Grossman asked the Board, how do they feel about the new Hartland possibility? She feels it is promising. Another question from the public was posed: If Sharon chooses to remain with their SU, then what? Buttrey responded, Thetford and Strafford would merge but not include Hartland. However, Strafford has a different operating system with teacher contracts, and they are a K-8. Thetford has history with Strafford that it does not have with other districts. Ben Williams asked what an informal merger with the school boards would look like. Buttrey replied there would be a formal statement of intent, followed by joining the study group.

Darrah stated the Board thought they would have to decide tonight, but the target keeps moving. It is clear that Strafford is a partner, but it remains unclear how to make that happen. It could be a side by side or an alternate structure. There is not much more to decide tonight other than to do something with Strafford. Buttrey stated that Strafford is meeting tonight, too.

Patricia Smith asked if there are specifics about an alternate structure; what would the advantages be other than complying with Act 46? Darrah agreed that it is a way to comply with Act 46 in an SU with contiguous districts that Thetford is already interacting with in many areas, making it a natural relationship. It also allows for continued discussion for potential mergers and efficiencies that could happen later. Buttrey added that Thetford would be creating a new SU and details like cost and location would be questions answered in a study group. With an alternate structure there are no tax benefits. Buttrey stated it is best to look farther out than seeking temporary tax benefits. It is difficult to estimate the cost of a new SU. The date for the Orange Windsor SU to decide about a study group for White River SU has been extended which gives TTSD more flexibility. Thetford doesn't have a deadline but it is important to keep up with others to

avoid being left alone.

Q: Would the State more likely to consider a non-contiguous town like Hartland because Thetford has a relationship with them? Buttrey stated he thinks the AOE would recognize the historical relationship. Briglin added that if the Secretary of Education did ask Hartland, where do your kids go to high school, Hartland would answer TSA, Hanover, TA; and if Sharon and Strafford were asked the same question, the answers would be the same. He speculated that type of overlap would be looked upon favorably.

Francine A'ness asked, the compromise for Strafford would be giving up their 7/8; what are Thetford's compromises? Buttrey answered that teachers contracts would merge. There is the issue of Strafford's flexibility with their waiver process vs. Thetford's lack of waiver process. Strafford designates TA, so every Strafford student is guaranteed a place at TA. If the school districts merge, the boards would need to agree on the waiver language.

Q: With Act 46, can Strafford still send students to Hanover? Buttrey replied, yes they can unless they agree to an inflexible waiver. In the articles of incorporation there would be a policy statement about how to grant those waivers.

Rebecca Yukica asked, is it true that most of Strafford's special education students come to TA? Buttrey responded that TA has a highly regarded special education program. Bugg added, TA receives 50% or more of Strafford's high school students, and in addition to students with special education needs, there is a healthy profile of remaining students.

Q: What are Stockbridge's motivations? They are K-6 with choice. Stockbridge sends a lot of students to TSA, so if Sharon is involved then Stockbridge wants to be, too.

Nick Reo stated he would like to hear from TA preliminarily how these options might affect them in the future in regards to areas like sustainability and student enrollment. Curtis Richardson, a member of the TA Board, stated it is too early to talk about this. However, clearly any new configurations that take sending towns away from TA affect TA's enrollment, such as Hartland. Do those towns maintain choice, or designate TA? Reo asked if merging with Strafford or forming an alternate structure would affect those towns' choice? Buttrey answered, no. Hartland wants to keep choice. Bugg stated that he is optimistic. There are about 12 towns that TA is currently working with. About 110-115 students come from other towns. He is optimistic that most if not all choice towns will be able to continue to choose TA, although there are still details to work out.

A member of the public commented that it seems like a lot depends on the sending towns. Thetford has to take care of itself and hope designating towns will keep choosing TA. Darrah disagreed, saying that if sending towns are retaining choice, they don't have to designate TA to keep sending students to TA.

Q: Would Thetford have to have choice too? Buttrey replied, no, everyone would maintain their current operating structure.

Richardson pointed out that because of geography in this part of Vermont, transportation is critical. TA has invested in transport from Hartland, Topsham, and Corinth. This will continue.

Dana Grossman encouraged the Board to pursue an alternate structure that includes Hartland. Stockbridge did not make sense to her initially, so she was interested to hear of their relationship with Sharon. Thetford, Strafford, Sharon, and Hartland makes a lot of sense on many levels, cultural and practical. She strongly encouraged the Board to pursue Hartland. Buttrey stated that Hartland has given a little interest. They are in group with Windsor, Weathersfield and West Windsor. Hartland does not want to give up choice. Once a district is in a study group a second group cannot be joined. Hartland could leave their current study group if they decide they want to join one with Thetford.

Maureen Burford asked, how soon would Strafford need to indicate their willingness to let go of 7/8? Buttrey replied that Thetford would have to decide to enter into a study group with the 4 towns, vs. just with Strafford in a side by side. Strafford does have to make a decision by the end of May about whether to join their SU study group. Burford stated she noticed a difference between responses in the online poll and the forum sticker poll. She wondered if people may not have been as informed when doing online survey. She suggested putting more weight on the forum results because of all the information presented at the forum. She asked, what are the benefits with these partnerships 20 years in the future for what Thetford wants to offer its students. She suggested taking a straw poll: side by side with Strafford vs. alternate structure.

Ted MacVeagh stated that if Thetford decides on a side by side with Strafford, there will have to be an agreement on the waiver policy. He expressed concern that if Thetford becomes more liberal with waivers, that could possibly hurt TA. Buttrey stated it is too early to figure out those conversations about the waiver policy. There are a lot of ways to resolve these issues. Sterner added that almost every survey respondent chose TA as the 1st choice for high school. It is unlikely people would leave TA. Buttrey stated that the legislative statute indicates that if a Strafford resident gets a waiver, Strafford will pay up to TA's tuition. If Thetford merges with Strafford, what happens to that statute? Act 46 says statute can't be changed.

A member of the public expressed her faith in the school board. Another echoed the suggestion to weigh the forum results more heavily because those voters were probably more informed.

Q: Would the Board set a deadline for other towns to join to help decide about what to pursue with Strafford? Are other towns doing that? Buttrey agreed the Board could do that, but that strategy could turn other towns away.

Ben Williams asked if an alternate structure needs special approval, and what is the risk of this option? Darrah responded that a plan would be needed to justify the configuration and how it will be more efficient and promote equal learning opportunities for the students. The plan needs to be approved by the AOE. It may be more expensive to build the vision and philosophy together. Williams added that Thetford currently financially contributes to OESU, so that money would just go to the new SU instead.

Diana Kimball-Anderson asked, what would the new school board look like in alternate structure? Darrah replied that each school district would maintain their own boards, and there would be an SU board.

Dana Grossman pointed out that while there is cost to developing a new structure and a new SU, to consider the quote, "If you think education is expensive, try ignorance." Where towns go with Act 46 is going to be very significant for education and the culture of our towns. She discouraged the Board from being short sighted about costs. This will also effect real estate values later. Some effects won't be as tangible. She commended the Board for their time and effort. It is important to make the right choice.

Reo stated it is never too early to think about the specifics of the choices, especially the potential side by side conversation with Strafford. It is a negotiation. It is never too soon for the Board to start thinking about all the options and preparing for the negotiation. Tax and tuition numbers should be crunched even if they are preliminary. Buttrey agreed, but added there are many variables now and a large decision making tree. Burford echoed Reo's comments in the context of Strafford's issues related to a side by side. Kimball-Anderson added that when Strafford met, they favored an alternate structure as well. They were not in favor of the side by side. Buttrey agreed that a merger with Thetford was not Strafford's first choice.

7:55, the majority of the public departed.

OTHER BUSINESS: The audit report has not been received. An ad needs to be posted on the listserv and in the paper for the Board opening. The position is finishing the last year of a 3 year seat. May 24th can be the interview date. Darrah discussed the joint Board meeting with the TA Board Chair. One possible topic is an update on the outdoor initiative, and discussing if TES kids can be incorporated. Petrone stated he met with Bugg regarding consolidating maintenance. This would be a good time of year to decide about that because of contracts. Darrah stated it is required to put it out to bid because of the amount.

ADJOURNMENT: MOTION: (Buttrey/Downey) moved/seconded to adjourn the meeting at 8:08 p.m. (unanimous approval).

FUTURE MEETINGS:

4/26/16	Thetford Town School District Meeting	6:00 p.m.
5/10/16	OESU Board Meeting (Oxbow)	6:00 p.m.
5/10/16	Thetford Town School District Meeting (Oxbow)	7:15 p.m.

Minutes Prepared By:
Amy Bosco, Minutes Clerk

RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED,

Julie Acker, Board Clerk