

TRI-TOWNSCHOOL ANALYSIS

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENT ON
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING
DECLINING SCHOOL ENROLLMENTS IN
CHAPLIN, HAMPTON, AND SCOTLAND

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SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENT ON RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING DECLINING SCHOOL ENROLLMENTS IN CHAPLIN, HAMPTON, AND SCOTLAND

INTRODUCTION

On April 7 and April 21, 2015, the First Selectmen of Chaplin, Hampton, and Scotland convened tri-town meetings at the Parish Hill School auditorium to present recommended options for containing the tri-town region's rising education costs. Representatives from the civil engineering consulting firm Milone & MacBroom presented the findings of a Comprehensive Enrollment Analysis and Facility Utilization Study conducted in October 2014 of the three towns' individual elementary school districts as well as Regional School District (RSD) 11.

The Working Group that carried out the study presented a number of options in their report and in the tri-town meetings, including changing the grade configuration of existing schools, redistricting, and dissolving Regional School District 11. The Working Group reached consensus that the current operational system of four Boards of Education and School Administrations is not viable for the long-term, and it recommends that the three towns embark on a tri-town planning study that examines the costs for expanding RSD 11 through various school/configuration options. Attorney Eileen Duggan followed the Milone & MacBroom presentation with an overview of the legal requirements associated with pursuing the Working Group's recommendations.

After these presentations, Dr. Donna Merritt from the State Education Resource Center (SERC) facilitated a forum for public comment on the recommendations put forward by the working group. At both the April 7 and April 21 meetings, each selectman offered brief introductory remarks and then participants had approximately 75 minutes for providing comments and questions to them for their consideration in determining the next steps. Respondents were limited to citizens of Chaplin, Hampton, or Scotland, and included adults with and without children in the school systems, and high school students enrolled at Parish Hill.

The procedure for providing verbal feedback consisted of a participant approaching one of two microphones placed at the front of the auditorium; stating their name, street address, and town of residence; and delivering their feedback in three minutes or less. Participants also had the option of providing their feedback in written form, and index cards and pens were made available. Verbal comments and questions were captured in real-time by a researcher from SERC and displayed on a large screen at the front of the room. The facilitator made it clear that the purpose of the forum was to give residents the opportunity to have their questions and comments heard and documented in a public setting, and that presenters and First Selectmen would not necessarily have time to respond to feedback during the meeting.

CONTENT OF PUBLIC COMMENT

Citizens approached the microphones to provide public comment 41 times on April 7 and 31 times on April 21. (Approximately 150 citizens attended the meeting on April 7, and approximately 65 attended on April 21.) In a few cases, an individual citizen approached the microphone 2 or 3 times on the same night. In other cases, an individual citizen who approached the microphone on

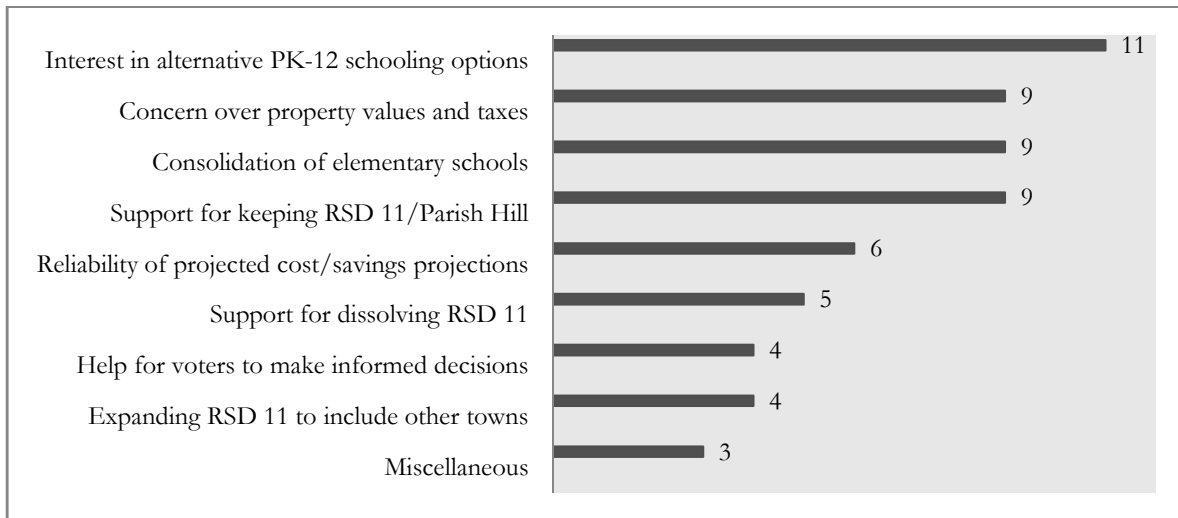
April 7 also provided comment on April 21. Therefore, the counts above do not represent 72 different individuals, but approximately 65 to 68 individuals.

Fifteen (15) comments were requests for specific information from the presenters about the following:

1. Procedural regulations concerning referendums
2. Authority of and representation in a regional school board
3. Timeframe for next steps
4. Scope of the study conducted by Milone & MacBroom and procedures for projecting future school enrollments
5. Plans for use of Parish Hill if it is no longer used as a school

The remaining 60 comments were distributed among nine topic areas, including an area labelled “Miscellaneous,” which was used to categorize three comments that could not be easily grouped with others. Figure 1 illustrates the numerical distribution of public comment across these nine areas.

Figure 1



The full text of the comments grouped in these categories is presented in Appendix A.

ANALYSIS

Through the presentation by Milone & MacBroom consultants, meeting participants were asked to consider the following recommendations developed by the Tri-Town Working Group:

1. Expand RSD 11 to include PK-6 with no change to schools or current grade configurations.
2. Expand RSD 11 to include one consolidated PK-6 school and keep Grades 7-12 at Parish Hill.
3. Expand RSD 11 to include three PK-8 schools, and have high school students tuitioned out to other towns.

4. Expand RSD 11 to include three elementary schools reconfigured to PK-2, 3-5, and 6-8, and have high school students tuitioned out to other towns.

During the time for public comment, citizens expressed viewpoints pertaining to each of these options. To put this data in a usable format and facilitate the Working Group’s decision-making, SERC used a two-step approach for analyzing the content of citizens’ remarks. First, we determined which of the options above the comments were addressing. Then, we determined whether the comments spoke to possible (1) opportunities or (2) concerns created by the option. We have summarized the findings of this analysis in Table 1.

Table 1

If Region 11 expands to include PK-6...	Then... (opportunities)	Then... (concerns)
...with no change to schools or current grade configurations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students will continue to receive attention as a result of having small classes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Class sizes will continue to grow smaller. • Teachers and students will continue to feel anxious about decreasing student enrollment. • Property taxes will continue to rise. • Families who do not want their children to attend Parish Hill will continue to move out and/or select alternative school options.
...with one consolidated PK-6 school and keeping grades 7-12 at Parish Hill	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students will have access to more robust and diverse experiences and peer groups. • The least disruption and most cost savings will be realized. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Property values will decrease because towns do not have their own elementary schools. • Jobs at the elementary school will be lost. • Property taxes will continue to rise. • Families who do not want their children to attend Parish Hill will continue to move out and/or select alternative school options. • Some young children will spend a long time on buses.

If Region 11 expands to include PK-6...	Then... (opportunities)	Then... (concerns)
<p>...with three PK-8 schools and high school students are tuitioned out to other towns</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students will have access to more robust and diverse experiences and peer groups. • Redundancies at the elementary level will be addressed and greatest cost savings will be realized. • Students will have a minimal number of transitions. • Property taxes will decrease and housing will be more affordable for young families. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Families' sense of having their children belong to small, safe learning communities will be lost. • Some of the current high school students will experience anxiety about moving to a new school. • Property values will decrease because towns do not have their own elementary schools. • Jobs at all schools will be lost. • Extra transportation and special education costs will be incurred and offset potential cost savings. • Young children will spend a long time on buses.
<p>...with three elementary schools reconfigured to PK-2, 3-5, and 6-8, and high school students are tuitioned out to other towns</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students will have access to more robust and diverse experiences and peer groups. • Redundancies at the elementary level will be addressed and greatest cost savings will be realized. • Property taxes will decrease and housing will be more affordable for young families. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Families' sense of having their children belong to small, safe learning communities will be lost. • Some of the current high school students will experience anxiety about moving to a new school. • Property values will decrease because towns do not have their own elementary schools. • Students will be making transitions every 3 years, and complexity of bus transportation will be high. • Jobs at all schools will be lost. • Extra transportation and special education costs will be

If Region 11 expands to include PK-6...	Then... (opportunities)	Then... (concerns)
		<p>incurred and offset potential cost savings.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some young children will spend a long time on buses.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Public comment can offer valuable insight into citizens' perceptions of community issues. To capitalize on the data collected through the meetings in April 2015, SERC recommends that the First Selectmen review the sentiments captured in Table 1 to determine their accuracy. Given the complexity of the issues discussed, it is likely that key details may have been overlooked or misunderstood by citizens in attendance. If First Selectmen determine that sentiments reflect a lack of accurate information, a targeted communication campaign could assist in ensuring that citizens have access to the facts they need to make an informed decision when it comes time to decide if the Boards of Education will support the planning study and/or the citizens vote on a referendum. In fact, some comments included specific suggestions about how to facilitate this process through effective communication (e.g., attaching cost estimates to each option listed in Table 1). With relevant, accurate information, the citizens of Chaplin, Hampton, and Scotland can be equipped to make a sound decision regarding the future educational options for the children in their communities.

APPENDIX A

REQUESTS FOR SPECIFIC INFORMATION (15)

1. Does there have to be a minimum enrollment of 400 students in a high school?
2. Re: CGS 10-47b – what would happen if a referendum failed in one of the three towns but passed in the other two towns?
3. Did the working group look at potential monetary outlays associated with Parrish Hill and was that considered in the recommendations?
4. Could the presenter from Milone and MacBroom clarify what misrepresentations about education were?
5. How were projected enrollments in the report calculated?
6. If Parish Hill is closed, what will it be used for?
7. What would the weight of votes [among the three towns] be if voting were to happen today?
8. How will educational program at Parish Hill be improved if proposed options go forward? Will students be consulted?
9. Majority of voters previously chose cooperative agreements. Why is this option not being considered?
10. What is the timeframe for implementing next steps?
11. Have there been studies about how to increase enrollment?
12. Is there still room for the communities to use focus groups to determine possible options beyond what the working group has recommended? Questions the decision about which entity would provide leadership (i.e., Region 11).
13. Does a regional board have the authority to close a school or does that decision go to referendum?
14. Last meeting clarified that each town would have representation in the new consolidated board. Can it be clarified again?
15. If the status quo is maintained, are there projections about how long it will be before Scotland goes bankrupt? Are Hampton and Chaplin looking at the same possibility?

INTEREST IN DIFFERENT PK-12 SCHOOLING OPTIONS (11)

1. This [new plan] would provide children with more educational opportunities than what they currently have.
2. Citizen has a child in an elementary school. Child doesn't have a support system in current school. Concerned about child coming to a middle school without the support she needs.
3. Citizen is concerned that his child will not be prepared for life by staying in a small community.
4. Good experiences at elementary school at the start, but past year has been negative. Classes growing smaller. Concern that there are no opportunities to expand the number of children that her child can interact with.
5. Many students chose not to attend PH and were pleased to discover new opportunities that were available at other schools. Not all other schools in the area are big, and could offer small size and greater opportunities at lower cost. Past referendum focused on building a new PH. No former students supported building another school.

6. What does it say that 42% of eligible students chose to go to high schools other than Parish Hill?
7. Large schools are not necessarily impersonal. They often use small learning communities as a way to personalize education. Students have the benefit of small class sizes as well as a larger pool of offerings, including college scholarships.
8. Panel needs to consider all students in the three towns, not just those attending PH. Look at why students do not choose Parish Hill.
9. Student enrollment at high school is continuing to decline. High school students should have a choice about which nearby high schools to attend. (excerpted from longer written comment)
10. Study should look at the number of additional students who would request to be tuitioned out if they had the option.
11. How many students from Parish Hill are waitlisted at other schools? (i.e., not everyone who is at Parish Hill decided not to apply to other schools)

SUPPORT FOR KEEPING RSD 11/PARISH HILL (9)

1. Student at PH: benefits far outweigh drawbacks of having a small school—small school provides students with more opportunities to contribute.
2. Citizen has children at Parrish Hill, and they are getting a great education. She chose a small community for this purpose. Small class sizes are a plus. Can there be more of an emphasis on preserving what they have?
3. Student at PH: Her experience with music program shows her that there are many opportunities here. Sports program also provides opportunities. Perceptions of decreases in population can create anxiety among teachers and students.
4. Student at PH: She is glad she did not choose to go to another school when it was time for her to decide in 8th grade. Support from guidance counselor at PH is very strong.
5. Citizen has a child with a hearing impairment. She is aware children get teased in smaller classes. She is concerned that if Parish Hill goes away, her son will lose the support he has in Hampton. She appreciates that in a small community children's needs are noticed and met. Losing the high school would be huge.
6. Human toll related to closing PH – students here are satisfied. She does not want to leave PH and go to another school. Requests that people consider PH students' feelings and experiences.
7. Student at PH: PH small building and small student body is intentional. Students love being here and knowing every person that they go to school with. Feels that he can explore his academic interests here. PH has much to offer.
8. Small size is a positive thing. Builds long-term friendships. Everyone knows each child and family. Sheltering kids is a positive thing. Kids have many opportunities here before and after school. Commit to keeping PH open and focus efforts and resources towards that direction.
9. Students who graduate from Parish Hill are being successful. Before tearing apart what exists, more of an effort needs to be made to build up what is already in place, perhaps by asking for more funding from the state.

CONSOLIDATION OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS (9)

1. Appreciate that there is attention being paid to redundancies. The redundancies exist at the elementary level. She would prefer to regionalize at this level rather than at the 7-12 level.
2. Consolidation of elementary schools can offer savings.
3. Combining elementary schools makes more sense than putting high school students in a different school.
4. Will towns losing their elementary schools be the wave of the future?
5. Try to minimize the number of transitions that reconfiguration will create for students from PK-6. Complexity of bus transportation will also increase.
6. In the course of five years, the Hampton Elementary School's budget has decreased by 3.6%. To account for decreased budget, positions have been cut. Concern about study not accounting for costs related to closing of Hampton Elementary and the human cost of transporting young children in buses for long periods of time.
7. Has the option of consolidating the elementary schools been considered?
8. Has committee considered PK-3 and 4-6 reorganization/consolidation?
9. Is there another town in the state that doesn't have its own elementary school?

CONCERN ABOUT PROPERTY VALUES AND TAXES (9)

1. Keeping PH will drive up taxes.
2. Real estate agent: not having a high school will not cause property values to decline—may actually increase. Property taxes make it difficult for young families or young people to buy here. Some have sold their properties because they do not want their children to attend PH.
3. Full regionalization would empower one town to override what other towns would choose. Property value for that town would decline. (Excerpted from a longer written comment)
4. Citizen asks that the study examines the potential impact on property values if the elementary school closes. Asks that the study include these concerns.
5. Even if we had a great school system, real estate agents aren't allowed to tell prospective clients about the school systems, so prospective buyers choose not to buy here because property taxes are so high.
6. Regional district taxes should be based on total grand list of the region. State monies should go directly to schools not the towns.
7. Invite industry to come here to help build the tax base.
8. Concern that if PK-8 is consolidated, property values will be negatively impacted due to loss of town-based elementary schools.
9. Cost of property taxes makes it very challenging to pay for college tuition for parents with college-age children. Should Scotland go bankrupt, the district as it exists now will dissolve anyway.

RELIABILITY OF PROJECTED COST/SAVINGS CALCULATIONS (6)

1. School budgets are three of the smallest, even though per pupil expenses are high. High school expenditures do not include certain line items if those students will be tuitioned out to other high schools. That number should be corrected as requested previously.
2. Special education costs: why are these included in some estimates and not in others? Should also look at decreases over the past decade.
3. Tuition costs for similar high schools – some didn't take special education costs into account.

4. Factoring in extra costs of transportation and special education costs eliminates any cumulative costs savings associated with closing Parish Hill.
5. Won't the increased transportation costs offset savings?
6. How realistic are the proposed cost savings? Extra transportation costs will offset other savings.

SUPPORT FOR DISSOLUTION OF RSD 11 (5)

1. District dissolution is not one of the options reflected in the minutes. Voters have voted to tuition out high school students in the past. PK-8 students should return to each town. Should revisit the other options in 5 years. Possible that the population may recuperate.
2. The option of towns to absorb 7th and 8th graders (by closing Parish Hill) has fallen off the table.
3. Dissolution should be an option presented for discussion and for voters. Voters in 2 of the three towns have already voted for this. Misinformation had been distributed, which made the options less clear.
4. The study has gone on too long. Eliminate Region 11 and have each town go their own way. Something has to change to decrease cost of living. Local boards need to take care of their own students. Too many questions that could not be answered.
5. If there were to be \$5,000 in savings per student at PH, it would amount to \$600,000 a year, as much as \$8 million in savings over 10 years. These savings would benefit residents by funding improvements for residents. District 11 is a failed experiment. PH is bankrupting the three towns, particularly Scotland.

COMMUNICATION TO FACILITATE VOTING (4)

1. Majority of citizens may not read a long report. If an executive summary of pros and cons was made available, it would help disseminate information more effectively.
2. Can there be proposals about what each option will cost? Simplify the questions so that voting is easier.
3. Current vs. projected costs of sending students to other towns would be appreciated when it comes time to vote.
4. How will selectmen reach out to people who do not have children in the schools and may not be interested enough to attend these public meetings?

INCLUSION OF OTHER TOWNS IN THE REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT (4)

1. The option to have the district include other towns should be looked at.
2. Are there incentives that could be offered to other towns so that they might consider enrolling in RSD 11? Windham has sent more students here in recent years. Better recruiting strategies are needed.
3. Share information about the actual incentives being offered to other towns, how many towns have been asked, and what the response has been. Also, consider the effect of sending young children to school in other towns.
4. Is there a possibility of adding an additional town to the regionalized district?

OTHER (3)

1. Time is running out, and we need to make a decision. The only way to make a decision is to pull together as three towns.

2. The solution must be found outside of committees and studies. Strong leadership from towns is needed. Let boards of education propose options to the town.
3. Most of the speakers tonight who were in favor of keeping PH open were students and not tax payers. There should have been a differentiation or announcement if you were a student speaking or an adult tax payer speaking. (comment submitted on an index card)