

Newport County Unified High School Exploratory Committee

Minutes

4:00 -5:45 PM - Thursday, February 24, 2014

Attendees

Present: **Richard P. Adams**, Middletown Town Council; **Marco T. Camacho** (Alternates) Newport City Council; **Kellie E. DiPalma**, Middletown School Committee; **Sandra J. Flowers**, Newport School Committee; **Justin S. McLaughlin**, Newport City Council, Vice Chair; **Naomi L. Neville**, Newport City Council; **William R. O'Connell**, Middletown School Committee; **Robert B. Power**, Newport School Committee; **Barbara A. VonVillas**, Middletown Town Council, Chair

Not Present: None

Approval of Minutes

Minutes of the February 10, 2014 meeting of the Exploratory Committee were reviewed and unanimously approved.

Review of Draft Enabling Legislation

Ms. VonVillas began the meeting by introducing Mr. Paul Silva, Chair of the Bristol-Warren School Committee. Mr. Silva had previously provided the Committee with comments on the Draft Enabling Legislation. He began the discussion by noting that he had been a member of the Bristol-Warren Committee for the past 20 years, about two years after the regional districts formation. His comments are summarized below. (Note: The order of items discussed is altered to capture discussion threads.)

Unified District School Board Composition and Voting

Mr. Silva commented that as structured the even number of members could produce deadlock, even if approval required a 4 – 2 vote. He recommended a Board of three members from each community and an additional member elected from the Newport-Middletown community.

Mr. Silva also recommended that Board member terms be phased to create a stable Board. He noted that to achieve “rolling terms” initial terms of differing periods would be required and that 4 year terms were best for Board stability and continuity. Mr. Silva thought that a Board of 5 members was the minimum required because the board should be large enough to accommodate subcommittee responsibilities without creating overly burdensome schedules or overlapping responsibilities.

The Board Chair should serve a four year term to create continuity of leadership and to avoid an unreasonably steep “learning curve” when assuming the duties of Board Chair. Mr. Silva did not recommend Co-Chairs but did suggest it was a good idea to have Chair and Vice-Chair from different municipalities.

Multiple Bargaining Units

Mr. Silva said that he strongly recommended negotiating all labor contracts before forming a unified district. He observed that unless the relationship between the unified district administration and unions was clear before forming the district, it would inevitably result in confusion, misunderstanding and disrupt the educational process.

Disputes and Discussions

Mr. Silva observed that in his experience some of the most difficult and heated discussion had revolved around issues such as mascots and athletic team names which were less than central to the functioning of a Unified District.

The Rhode Island State Funding Formula

It was Mr. Silva’s opinion that the changes in state funding formula had not fundamentally changed the organization or educational effectiveness of the Bristol-Warren Regional District but it had, in common with districts which lost funds, created financial challenges. He noted that the formula now used did not explicitly acknowledge the existence of regional districts or deal directly with their unique financial problems.

Unified High School District Effectiveness

Mr. Silva said that he was concerned that a High School only unified district would have difficulties providing the K through 12 continuity needed to achieve the educational outcomes desired. He was concerned that separating HS

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curricula from middle and elementary school education with create a disconnected system and difficulties coordinating curricula.

Financial Management

Mr. Silva began the discussion of regional financial management by noting that as a guiding principle the Bristol-Warren Regional district did not make financial support dependent on where a student lived and/or the needs of individual or groups of students. Apportioned expenses are based only on student populations at a specified time.

He said that the attitude of the Bristol-Warren Regional School Board was that we are all in this together and costs must be handled on that basis.

Mr. Silva did not recommend attempting to establish separate taxing authority for a unified district. He felt that City/Town Council should retain their present taxing authority and process and appropriate funds for the Unified District as part of the existing budgetary and approval process.

The Committee and Mr. Silva participated in a general discussion of Bristol-Warren financial management and funding.

Joint Finance Committee

The Committee and Mr. Silva discussed the structure and functioning of the Bristol-Warren Joint Financial Committee (JFC). The JFC consists of members of the Bristol and Warren Town Councils, appointed by each Town Council. As currently structured JFC members constitute a majority of each Council.

The JFC has no spending authority or staff to support its work, but relies on the staff of the two town governments. The JFC is empowered to review the annual budget developed and submitted by the regional school district and determine the funding level need to educate district students. The JFC apportions the budget based on student populations and forwards budget shares to each Town Council for approval, appropriation and funding.

Line Item level data is provided to the JFC by the Regional School District to support budget deliberations.

The Committee asked what would, in Mr. Silva's opinion, be the effect of eliminating the Joint Financial Committee and instead forwarding the Regional District budget apportionments directly to the Bristol and Warren Town Councils. Mr. Silva indicated that he thought such a process would be a prescription for creating disputes and difficulty obtaining needed funding.

The Bristol-Warren Budget Process

In response to a Committee question, Mr. Silva said that at present there is no "Preliminary Budget" data provided to the JFC and/or Town Councils as is the custom (and required by RIGL) for single community school districts. He indicated that the Regional District budget process follows and is coordinated with the Towns' budgetary schedule.

Mr. Silva was asked what happens in the event a town council does not approve the budget submitted by the JFC and/or does not actually transfer the approved funds. He responded that the first case had not occurred since the JFC consisted of a majority of each Council. In the event funds were not transferred, he said that could result in a court action and one such action was now in process.

Mr. Silva thought that regular financial reports to the JFC from the Regional School Committee were necessary and should be made a part of the financial process. He thought it a good idea to include such a requirement in enabling legislation. He also recommended specifying a regular meeting schedule for both the Unified School Committee and Joint Financial Committee similar to the schedules established for single-municipality school districts.

Enabling Legislation Review and Financial Reporting

Mr. Silva said that it was, in his view, imperative that the Enabling Legislation include a requirement to review and modify the legislation on a regular basis, similar to town charter reviews. He noted that Bristol-Warren had not held such a review because it was not required, although various changes were needed.

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Capital Expenditures and Bonding

In response to a series of questions related to capital expenditures and bonding, Mr. Silva indicated that an extensive building and renovation program had been undertaken by the regional district. He said that the Bristol-Warren District issued its own debt instruments, had its own debt rating and the expenses of principal and interest payment were included in annual budgets apportioned to the towns based on student population. Bonds issued by the regional district were subject to approval by voter referendum in both Bristol and Warren.

Results of Bristol-Warren Regionalization

Mr. Silva began a general discussion of the results of regionalization by saying that he had initially been opposed to regionalization for a variety of reasons similar to those that the Committee is now hearing. These include loss of school and municipal identity, risks to educational achievements, possible loss of jobs, funding complexity, differing union contracts, etc. He noted that students had accepted regionalization “from day one” without objection and that given the interconnectedness of today’s students he thought the reaction of students would be the same in Middletown and Newport.

In general, Mr. Silva thought that combining two small high schools had enabled the regional district to offer more educational opportunities than would have ever been possible with separate districts. He said the quality of education had improved and programs offered had expanded. He felt that the high school population of 1,100 students had proved sufficient to support these educational gains. He also observed that regionalization had not saved as much money as originally promised, but had resulted in no regionalization-caused layoffs. In sum, he thought Bristol-Warren regionalization had been a success.

When discussing “cultural” issues he noted that there were significant differences in the number of free lunches, and other socio-economic indicators prior to regionalization but that he was convinced that combining the two communities’ student populations had resulted in a richer level of diversity and was good preparation for entry into the wider world.

Mr. Silva said that staffing changes and increases had been driven more by state requirements for performance review and other mandates than by regionalization.

Bristol-Warren Regional District Career Education

The Committee and Mr. Silva discussed the career-oriented offerings provided by the regional district. In general, he believed that Bristol-Warren offered robust career path education and training through private and public partnerships. He also recommended the establishment of an Educational Foundation to access and enable funding for career education.

The Unification process

Mr. Silva offered several ideas for obtaining public input to the unification process. These included conducting public workshops and hearings, defining and directly addressing community concerns and how to deal with the changes in education created by regionalization.

Schedule

Discussion of a draft calendar of events was deferred to the next meeting. The pacing event is submission of a referendum question to the voters in both municipalities in the November 2014 election.

Proposed Meetings Calendar

The Committee agreed to meet as follows.

Date	Time	Place
Monday, March 10 th	4 - 6 PM	Newport Public Library, Rotary Conference Room, 1 st floor
Monday March 24 th	6 – 8 PM	Newport Public Library, Rotary Conference Room, 1 st floor

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Thursday, April 17th 6 – 8 PM TBD

Tuesday April 29th 6 – 8 PM TBD

Agenda Items

Committee members are asked to submit agenda items by March 5, 2014.

Agreed Items

Item	To Do	By Whom?	When?
Draft Calendar & Timeline	Create a calendar of events for distribution to Committee members	VonVillas	Pending
Additional Comments on Enabling Legislation Markup	Send all comments, corrections and markup to Dick Adams.	All Members	Inputs by 3/5/2014

Respectfully Submitted,



Richard Adams



Jacqueline Marque | Staff photographer

Paul Silva, chairman of the Bristol Warren Regional School Committee, speaks Monday during a meeting of the Newport County Unified High School Exploratory Committee. The group, made up of school committee and council members from Newport and Middletown, met at the Newport Public Library.

Exploratory committee hears pros, cons of unified schools

The chairman of the Bristol Warren Regional School Committee says the real winners are the students.

By Matt Sheley
Staff writer

NEWPORT — Bristol and Warren are able to offer students of both towns more together than they could as separate school districts, according to the chairman of the Bristol Warren Regional School Committee.

Paul Silva spoke Monday during a meeting of the Newport County Unified High School Exploratory Committee at the Newport Public Library. Silva has been on the Bristol Warren Regional School Committee for 20 years.

"We're allowed to have a more comprehensive school system and school district because we're together," Silva said.

Silva said the arrangement has saved some money, although not quite as much as people were led to believe when the regional school district was established in the early 1990s.

And while problems have arisen between the two communities, Silva said the real winners are the students, who are exposed to a greater array of programs and opportunities than they ever would be

'We offer more foreign languages, more sports, more extracurricular activities than either town could do separate.'

PAUL SILVA

chairman of the Bristol Warren Regional School Committee

in separate districts.

"We can offer more, and it's most notable at the high school," he said. "We offer more foreign languages, more sports, more extracurricular activities than either town could do separate."

Last summer, Middletown Town Council members Richard P. Adams and Barbara A. VonVillas began revisiting the long-discussed idea of merging schools in the region with the goals of providing a better education to all students and possibly saving money. The city of Newport was the lone community in Newport County to accept the invitation to study the prospect of establishing a regional high school.

The exploratory committee has been meeting since early January. It has crafted draft enabling legislation that would create a new high school district

'Academically, economically, geographically, it all makes sense, even if it's just Newport and Middletown.'

Marco T. Camacho, Newport City council member



Jacqueline Marque | Staff photographer

Members of the Newport County Unified High School Exploratory Committee meet Monday in Newport.

Schools

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between Newport and Middletown, the first step toward forming a unified high school.

The Newport City Council and Middletown Town Council would need to give the concept their blessing and enabling legislation would need to be secured through the General Assembly before a question would go to local voters on Election Day.

Before the two communities join high schools, Silva recommended that new contracts for all staff be negotiated by the new regional board. He also suggested the board overseeing the regional high school have an odd number of members to avoid tie votes. Currently, the proposed governing board would have three representatives apiece from Newport and Middletown.

As for paying for students, Silva recommended the member districts be charged the same amount on a per-pupil basis, an arrangement he said could save headaches along the way.

But based on what he's seen, Silva said the big issues weren't usually what tripped up a regional district; instead, it was the small, petty stuff.

For example, he said controversy arose when trying to decide a new mascot for the regional school district, usage of playing fields and other items.

"We end up with a husky," Silva said. "I'm not sure where it comes from, but we might have been better with a quahog. Those are the arguments that you get into. When I read the enabling legislation (for the Bristol Warren school district), a lot of what I see are two people who were told by

a higher authority they had to get together, but neither one liked the other."

Looking over the draft legislation for Newport and Middletown, Silva suggested they consider regionalizing their school systems entirely, an idea that's been broached during prior committee meetings. Such a move could eliminate bureaucracy rather than create a third layer of school administration and oversight, he said.

Also, by having a regional school district for kindergarten through 12th grade, there would be continuity from grade to grade, and nothing would be lost when students move into the regional high school, Silva said.

"In my mind, education has to flow, and what happens in kindergarten helps out what goes on in first grade and what happens in fifth grade helps what happens in sixth grade," Silva said. "It keeps going, and what you do up in the middle school effects what goes on in the high school, so if you don't have somebody overseeing the entire thing, I don't know if it necessarily flows."

However, should Newport and Middletown decide unifying was the way to go, the communities will need to stick to their guns, Silva said, because there will always be critics.

"The students accepted it from day one," Silva said. "It's the stupid stuff that gets in the way, dictated by the people who didn't want to do it in the first place anyway."

In response, committee members said Silva gave them some good ideas to think about, particularly when it came to focusing on the details.

"Some of the things that really struck me (were) being careful about athletic facilities," Adams said. "This (draft legislation) is totally silent on that. It says 'buildings.'

That's not athletic facilities. How would that work out?"

At the group's next meeting on March 10 at 4 p.m. at the Newport Public Library, board members said they would like to have the draft legislation finalized, if possible.

Referencing a vote last week in which a majority of the Middletown Town Council voted to remove the enabling legislation from its priority list, committee members said they did not believe the move was a death blow to the regionalization effort.

Rather, they said, the committee would need to redouble its efforts and show why regionalization made sense for students in particular, and for Newport and Middletown in general.

"We've been talking about this for two decades, at least," Newport City Councilman Marco T. Camacho said. "This is beyond snail's pace. ... Academically, economically, geographically, it all makes sense, even if it's just Newport and Middletown."

If things don't change, Camacho said, the whole region could continue to get older, the population would continue to decline and businesses would opt to locate elsewhere.

"If we can't achieve critical mass between two communities to get more families here, to get more students enrolled and actually start growing again as a community, then we're going to continue to have dark houses," Camacho said. "Newport is always going to be Newport in the summertime, no matter what, but at what point do we start shuttering things because our population decline has gone from 40,000 in the 1970s to just over 24,000?"

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