

TOWN OF GROTON
SELECT BOARD MEETING
October 17, 2023

In Attendance: John Rescigno, Tony Albert, Ron Madan and Sara Smith (Administrative Assistant)

Audience Members Present

John called the meeting to order at 7:00pm.

MINUTE APPROVAL

John motioned to approve the Work Session Meeting minutes of October 3, 2023 as written, Tony 2nd, so voted.

John motioned to approve the Select Board Meeting minutes of October 3, 2023 as written, Tony 2nd, so voted.

NEW BUSINESS:

Conversation regarding HB349 and the new potential school district

John started the meeting having the people that were there to discuss this and answer questions introduce themselves. John, Tony and Ron introduced themselves as the Groton Select Board. Terry Murphy introduced himself as a Bridgewater Selectman and on the Steering Committee. Virginia Parker introduced herself as a member of the school district budget committee and a member of the Steering Committee.

John explained that House Bill-349 is a unique law that will enable the three towns of Groton, Hebron and Bridgewater to exit SAU 4 and create its own SAU. This is not about lowering taxes, it's about tax stabilization and a better education for the students. The State Education committee in the House and Senate both supported this bill, and the Governor signed it into law. March is a critical time for all three towns to vote in favor of exiting SAU 4. Once passed, our three towns will no longer have to live in fear that another warrant article will be put forth us forever changing the tax formula for funding SAU 4. Had the original formula passed or any of the versions considered by the study committee the tax rate in the town of Groton would have risen to a level that would have crippled the town. Any town has the right to submit a warrant article every 5 years and he believes that as soon as next year that one can be submitted.

John said that this will provide a better education for the students for the following reasons:

- 1) Less time on the bus, Groton students will gain over 2 hours a day back by not having to travel to the middle school.
- 2) K-8 as opposed to k-6 is a better school model.
- 3) The Village School has outstanding test results.

John continued that if the SAU 4 school board is willing to work with us, we can do this with little to no disturbance to the students. We are currently attempting to work with SAU 4 on a tuition agreement for the High School and Administrative services. We have reached out to the school board several times and are waiting to hear back from them.

John closed stating that he would like to open this to questions, holding the question session to 20 minutes. He will take questions from Groton residents first since this is their informative session. He will then open to Hebron and Bridgewater, then any other remaining towns. John asked that each person state their name and the Town they are from.

Hilary Coles asked about when the students get in to Highschool, if there will be bus services for Newfound, Plymouth or anywhere else there may be tuition agreements set up. John said yes there would be bud services.

Jeremy Haney asked if they have had the discussions with Plymouth at all. Terry said that they have had some discussions and do have a future meeting with them and other school districts as well. There are also discussions with the Department of Education. The discussions have started that but we cannot discuss this until a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) is decided on. There will not be contracts until it is voted on. They have also started the "tailing out" agreement, that is four pages long, which states that for example a sophomore in High School could stay where they are and finish out their time at that High School. The tuition agreement discussions have started as well. They have put out a number of things on requests for proposals. The building is self-sufficient. They also have to think of the other students from other towns that go to our school. About 50% of the school is populated by Alexandria and Bristol. They also have two preschools; they have kids with learning disabilities and physical disabilities that they need to think about. They also haven't given up on that school. He said he just finished a grant for \$185,000 that he believes has a pretty good shot at passing. This is to replace the playground at the school and to build one for the children with disabilities. Things are going along well but there are always changes and concerns. They have had contact with some teachers. They have a union contract so by law that will continue on. They will also protect the kids that are presently in the school. They have been trying to work with the school district. The school district thinks that it is one size fits all and knows what is best for the kids. Some of it they do but to be honest this has been going on for years.

Terry said this is a historical real big deal. The last this was done was 50 years ago. By doing this, they will be able to get out of the school district and there will be a three-person school board and you will have a greater say about what goes on. These three towns have 161 students out of 1,150. Right now, they can outvote us very easily, whether it is on financial issues or anything else. The towns that have a \$20 tax rate versus the Towns that have a \$7.00-\$9.00 tax rate try to say that we are a wealthy community so they want to change the formula based on that. However, your home does not put out dollars to pay for the kids. With this, you will have better control on the long run. Right now, the education is really good at this school but there are deficiencies as you go through the school district. Some of that you can argue about the age but it continues. The kids start off in one of the top 25 schools in the state and then after that it goes down. It will be better control and if the school board would agree with us, the only happen is that you would have one school board of four and one school board of three and they would meet to try work out any differences they have. Giving up that seven-member board will be beneficial.

John said our goal is to work with the Newfound School District and to hopefully tuition in to the Highschool. Talks have not been going great. We are waiting on them. We have put out several requests to have them come meet with us. Ultimately, if they do not want to meet with us then they will give us no choice to go somewhere else and have these discussions.

David Darlington asked what is the objective of the committee to have in place by March so we can actually see what we are voting for and what exactly will happen. Right now, it is a lot of good things could happen but there is no commitment for any of these things. John said they need to pick up the pace and get into negotiations with whatever district we will be going to so that we can have all the information of what the schools will look like, what bussing will look like, what sports will look like, all of those pieces. There will not be any contracts until it is voted on in March but we need to have these details established. That way once all Towns vote in favor of this, they can move forward with the contacts.

Virginia added that they are looking at MOUs so that they will have more information before March. They are looking for districts in the area to share their intent to work with the steering committee should this pass, which they certainly hope it does. They are also talking to other vendors for the curriculum, bussing and things of that nature, so that they can have that information to share with the Towns before they vote.

David asked if they intend to have a budget. Virginia said that absolutely will have this done the best they can in the timeframe that they have been given.

Terry wanted to point out the back page of the handout that says "Why this meeting". This page shows the impact that if this fails in March, what the increases in our taxes will look like. If it passes, the worst that happens is \$1.00 more on the tax rate. If this doesn't pass, this last page shows the increases we could see for our taxes. Between Bridgewater, Hebron and Groton, you take 49% of the educational costs and all the extra money goes towards lowering the taxes for the other towns, not even one penny goes back to the children or towards education. John said that if you look at the chart, the three highlighted towns are us towns that are trying to leave. Also, if you look at the other towns, look how much their taxes will be dropping if they were to change the formula. If this does not pass, you can almost guarantee that they will be putting another warrant article through to change the formula at some point in time. It will also pass because they have more voters. We got very lucky this round that they were able to stall it and go into a committee over the summertime to look at ways to rework the tax formula and every way they reworked it the three towns that are highlighted here came out on the short end of the stick. That is a lot of money that we would have to put forward to support the other towns.

Sara Smith asked if we will have something like this last page that does a break down to show what our tax rate would look like if this passes in March. She said this last page is great to show us what could happen if it doesn't pass but she is a statistics person and in order to know exactly how she is voting she needs to see some of these numbers. We need to know that if we vote in favor of this what will our tax rate look like. Terry said earlier that worst case scenario will be that it increases \$1.00 if it passes but where are you getting that number from. It would be good to see something that states the building will need this much money to add more classrooms or whatever else it needs, along with the other costs. She said right now she couldn't vote yes or no on this not having all of the numbers for both scenarios. Virginia said she agrees and they are working towards that. They are working on this task right now which is part of reaching out to those vendors, the negotiations they are starting and it also doesn't come from nowhere. She said that the Department of Education is not new to this and they have templates and resources to help with this and these are people that they are actively in touch with.

John wanted to point out that when they put the House Bill forward, they had asked for 4 years to get this all together. The Newfound School District submitted an amendment cutting the time down to two years, which is why it is crunch time for everyone.

Terry said by the way \$1.00 on the tax rate will raise 1.68 million dollars per year. They will not spend that kind of money. The building was built so that it could be expanded if needed. Virginia said this is a unique situation. Most school districts own the buildings as a school district but the fact that Bridgewater Hebron School is its own entity, owning that building out right, is a leg up for us so we do not have to build another building. John added that SAU4 is looking at building another building.

Jim Gaffey said asked what are the arguments for remaining in the school district. Virginia said that it would be a change and people fear change. John said that technically there are not any because if the district is willing to work with the committee, then the kids would still be going to the same schools. They Bridgewater Hebron school would just go thru 8th grade. It would just be the high school next and if they are willing to work with them then the kids could still attend Newfound High School. Hilary said they would still get the money too.

John said that is correct because they would tuition in. John said that the state figures out the amount that the schools can charge for the tuition, they cannot just come up with some random expensive number. David stated that there would a downfall as far as they would have less input on the high school because they wouldn't have any one on the board. Virginia said that is correct, they wouldn't have a voting member of the school board, much like the position Hill is in now.

Terry said if you are talking about education quality, the benefit from this change is that a K-8 Model has less transitions. He wants to be clear that it is not the teachers in the middle school that cause the issues, it is putting a lot of kids in that age group in there. It is the equivalent of having a small garage, putting 40 cats in there and opening the door and expecting them to come out in single file, it isn't going to happen. There is a lot of things that go on in the middle school that you always see a decline but the problem is that you see the decline goes down. Plymouth has a K-8 system for all of its schools and then the kids have one transition and the kids do very well and that is the top 10% of the state. The cost to go there would be about \$21,648, we are paying about \$20,000 now. There are only 47 students that would go to the high school. He said he knows they work hard and it is a very difficult profession but it has been the same way for a long time and could benefit from change.

Terry said as far as costs go, if it fails you put yourself at a very high risk. Once this window closes, this two-year window that we have which we can do, then it closes and that is it. You will never have this again. RSA 195 governs cooperative school districts. This House Bill allows us a work around on having it so the other towns do not have to vote us out in order to leave, we can vote to leave. The way the current RSA is written they would have to vote us out and they would never do that because it would cost them more money. We have tried to do this in the past and were denied Bridgewater Hebron stopped the process because they threatened to take the Groton kids out of that school. That didn't make sense to them that the Groton kids would have to drive passed this school to go to another school so they pulled out. This gets away from that argument. The other thing is that transportation is completely separate. It is a complicated system but the laws are stacked against you and we only have a two-year window. They are not evil people they are just trying to lower their tax rate. They are trying to level the playing field.

Hilary wanted to say that she has been reading the building committee meeting minutes. As a parent who has kids in the school district, her concern is how often in all of these meetings they talk about splitting up the elementary school into K-3, 4-5, 6-8 and splitting up all these grades. There is so much data out there that shows this isn't good for the kids and does hinder there learning. The fact that their listening session shows that the vast majority of the people that show up don't want this but they still discuss it in the meetings is scary and shows they are not listening to anyone, never mind the smaller towns that have no voice.

Hilary also stated that she thought they were legally required to work with the towns since it is a House Bill that has passed. She asked what methods or tools do we have to hold SAU4 to show up and talk to us about this. Virginia said she is happy to say that they are having another meeting tomorrow and they are hoping that it will go well and that it will have progress. Ultimately it is them understanding that it is not us, there is very much in this for them too. To Terrys pint earlier, there is a preschool in that building, there are 50% of kids that are from other towns, and Bridgewater takes care of the school. Terry said the preschool has 32 children which 3 come from Bridgewater, Hebron and Groton. The problem is that the way it is set up now, Newfound only pays \$1.00 a year to lease it but our three towns have no say. The problem is they do not have room to do this. We would never want to kick the kids out. John said there should be motivation but there is resistance. They should be further along in the negotiation process than they are. Terry said there was a comment made at one of the meetings that if they work with us, they are aiding the withdrawal. John said that is the philosophy that if they work with us that they will be aiding in the process.

Virginia said that the reality is that if the vote is favorable in March, she thinks there will be a different reality and there would be a year until this goes into effect. Sara said that there will be a year after but the biggest concern is getting the information that the people need by March in order to know exactly what they are voting on. Sara said she spoke in favor of this House Bill in Concord before both the House and Senate, but it would be hard to know how to vote until she knows the numbers and exact information that she is voting on. John said that is why they are pushing hard to get more information before March town meeting so everyone knows what the costs will be.

John said that the school board doesn't pay much mind to that tax cap. He said that at the last deliberative session there was a warrant article put in to hire another teacher. It was not because the classes were packed, they just wanted another teacher. Most of the people that go to those sessions are from the school, they voted in favor of this so that additional salary went above and beyond the tax.

Slim Spafford said it is important to take more about the bus. He hadn't realized how early the kids in Town had to get up to catch the bus and how long they are on them. It was 6:00am and here comes a bus out of River Road. Some of the kids had to stand out in the dark waiting for the bus. That should be motivation enough to vote for this. He said they should emphasize this more. John said they will get about 2 hours back on their day that they will save from bus times that will give them more time to study, relax or whatever they would like to do with this time.

David asked if it is the intent of the new school district to have a tax cap of 2% as well. Terry not yet. He said as far as the money goes, to get back to Sara's point of view, they still have a lot to figure out. He said that Ashland has 164 students in a K-8. Their administrative services are done by SAU2 over in Interlakes. They send all of their High School students to Plymouth. Their budget is 4 million dollars. Bridgewater, Hebron and Groton currently spend 3.9 million dollars to turn around and pay for what we currently do for 161 kids.

David said his question is if there will be a tax cap like they are used to. Terry said he thinks they need to give them a chance to see what happens and show that they do not need a tax cap. The tax cap is a joke. There is a million dollars left over and they turn around and put to other funds outside of it and misrepresents how it works. Terry said the people can vote for it. David said if we don't believe they are following the tax cap then why wouldn't we want one ourselves. Virginia said it is more that there are different mechanisms to control spending outside of the tax cap because of the loop holes now. John said the demographics of the three towns are very similar. David said there should be a tax cap and budget.

John said that another nice thing about having a smaller community that is voting on the school district with these three towns, is that more townspeople are more likely to come out and discuss things and vote for them. David said that you are complaining about them not being reliable on living with the budget and the tax cap but you don't want to put that on yourself. John said they are not saying that. David said if you want people to buy into it then we should adopt the same criteria. Terry said that you can vote that in if you want but then it will be the same as it is. If this goes through, we will have meetings and you will have time to go through the budget rather than the deliberative session. In the same token, you can put in a warrant article to propose a 2% cap if you want to and leave it to the voters. Terry doesn't think this is necessary at the start and he doesn't think anybody has a reputation of this. When they built the school, they paid it off in five years.

Terry said he can tell us this for sure that we will get screwed if we vote this down because the tax rate will go up, more than that 2%. You will be handing your hard-earned dollars to Bristol, Alexandria, Danbury and New Hampton to lower their tax rate. Heath said that would only happen if they pass the other bill. John said yes because four towns have the opportunity to lower their tax rate so if you don't think one of those four towns will put together this warrant article again, and that those four towns won't vote in favor of it, you are wrong.

Pam Hamel said that she doesn't think it is a good way to start out and say we are going to do a 2% tax cap. We need to give this an opportunity to work first of all. Small communities, local control, more input from people and meetings and their needs. Not only control over your budget but control over the education itself and she thinks those are two things we have no control right now. We have zero say. She has been to so many deliberative sessions and seen the regular Joe not want something to pass but the room is filled with people who work at the school so they do vote for it. We need to have the opportunity to control this, see what needs are, see how this works first, and then like Terry said if we don't like the way it is working then we can change it at any time but like Virginia said there are so many loop holes to that who knows if that really matters.

Peter Bailey said that they mentioned the money from other towns. He wanted to make a statement. He said that Danbury gets 20 million dollars a year from the feds. Ruby Hill who represents the Town of Danbury gets this money, so you can take that out of the equation when it comes to Danbury. His question is that he believes in higher education and education period. His kids went to Newfound and they got a good sound education. That was then and it may have changed. What he has watched over the years is that Newfound School District has turned into a horror show. With Hill getting away from Franklin, he has watched that show go on and the money that has disappeared from the budgets. He feels they are nothing but a lying skunks. He thinks if we are going to make a move, we need to do it or get off the pot.

Slim asked if we would be an SB2 town. Terry said not if he can help it. His opinion is SB2 Towns is that you have lost control. What happens is good ideas people say no to and bad ideas people say yes to because they do not get enough information. He would have what we have where you discuss it and then you can vote for it or vote it down if you want. How can you have a budget where the default budget is as high as the budget you put in. Ultimately, once we get into it, you can vote to change to an SB2 town if you desire to but he doesn't recommend it. Everyone thought it was going to reduce taxes and it hasn't. They thought going to a five member Select Board would help and that didn't go any good either. The reality is the old town meetings are a decent way to run business. You can hold your feet to the fire, tell them what is going on and allow the people to vote.

Peter said that he has watched the buses with less children and has watched the transportation costs and has done the math and it doesn't compute. Terry said that a good thing is that Virginia, Erick and Jenn are on the budget committee so they know the numbers so we will be able to do this quite well with their assistance. One thing that was said at a meeting when it was tried to last time, was that you cannot get out of a school district unless you get voted out and he didn't know what to say so he said the last person to say that was the Kingmen in England to the colonists and you know how that turned out. Effectively, they now don't have any say whatsoever about us leaving this school district. This law no longer applies for this two-year period.

Pam said we will be voting on this in March and she thought that Hebron had a May town meeting so she asked how will that work. Terry said they have discussed this and the options for this. They have suggested a special town meeting, but they said this is not a good idea. He said that we could vote and not release the vote until May or release the votes from the two towns in March and then see how it goes for Hebron in May. Pam said that not having the results in March gives two fewer months that we could be working on this, so we could be losing two months that we could be working on contracts and this is precious time we could be losing. Terry said they are trying to find a work around on that. Terry said that there are snow storms in March that could delay the March Town meetings. They used to say we would hold the Town meeting no matter what but then he believes there was legislation that was passed that says you can delay the Town meeting.

Forest Blake asked what kind of feedback they are getting from the other two towns. John says it seems positive so far from the people that have come to the meetings. Terry said that Bridgewater, Hebron and Groton are very much in sync. There are parents that have concerns of course but they are doing their best to

address these concerns and answer the questions which is why they are working on the tailing out so the know their kids won't be thrown out in the dark.

Virginia said that the biggest concern she has seen is the Alexandria parents have concerns because they do not want to have to leave the Bridgewater Hebron school. She said that they don't want them to leave and want to work it out so they can stay. Sara said that she has heard concerns from parents of kids that are in high school or will be in high school when this goes through and they are concerned they will have to change school so she is happy to hear that this is being addressed and that they have a plan in place. Virginia said there has never been an instance of a tailing out agreement not happening. It is illogical on so many levels. Not just of the losing 15% of the population with a 2% tax cap, as someone who has done the budget for the last four years, that is a crisis.

Peter asked Terry what the gameplan is for where Bridgewater's stance is on this right now. He said that parents have concerns and they are addressing these concerns. Ultimately it is school choice. As stated on the handout, there are freedom accounts, credits for scholarships to other schools, charter schools, open enrollment, homeschooling and so on. There are all kinds of alternatives. They want to concentrate on school choice so if in 5th grade they want to go to Newfound Middle School then they want to have this be an option. If we only have 8 or 10 kids in the classrooms, they will put it out that the school has seats available and he guarantees there will be a line. They do a great job. The parents do a great job supporting the kids and the teachers and principal as well. They would like to stay with the school district and keep these relationships we have been dealing with but that is up to the school board. If they do not move forward, we may have to give them the boot to say they need to move forward on this. They found out recently that they do not want to negotiate they want us to put a piece of paper in front of them to go over this. It is complication but they will have all the pieces of the puzzle here. Terry said they have a great attorney working on this. They don't want things to change, they don't want to evict anyone from the options they have now but the school board needs to get on their game. He doesn't know what is best for anyone but what he does know is that the other towns do outvote us.

Sara asked that if SAU4 does move forward with these discussions and come up with agreements, is the ultimate goal to still to have school choice so will we still work with Plymouth or other schools or will these discussions hold us to having to go to Newfound only. Virginia said that is the intention to provide as much choice as possible, that is not to say that there will be a blank check that is handed out to each parent but they are going to look what is responsible for the taxpayers but allows choices for the parents but the exact details are still being worked on. They are maximizing opportunities while allowing a constant rate for the tax payer is the goal. There is a potential that if the parents want to send them to a different school that the parents may be responsible to pay the difference and to pay for transportation. Sara said that SAU4 is holding things up as far as us getting the information. She understands that the Steering committee wants to move forward with them for our kids but if SAU4 doesn't do something soon, will they move forward without them and move forward with Plymouth or someone else. We are getting closer to March and the people will want to know all these details before they vote. John said yes, they will.

Pete asked Terry what his overview for the transportation will be if they make this move. Virginia said that the K-8 model is an advantage and would be beneficial. If you have a family that has a 4th grader and a 7th grader, instead of the two stops you have now, you will have one stop at the same school.

David said Bridgewater Hebron Village School District and owns it but leases it for \$1. Terry said that is correct; they own the land and lease it out- when they wanted to change the formula, they said that they would lose that building; see notes on money they have had to put into it; they have no debt- they take care of this;

David said currently there is a Bridgewater Hebron School and a budget to maintain that school and they lease it for \$1.00. Terry said the Village District owns the school building and has deeded rights to the land and the building. They are coming up on the end of a 5-year lease. They did have a clause that said if you change the formula, they will lose the building. They don't have any say in the curriculum or any other components going on in the building. The Village District and Bridgewater and Hebron will continue to pay the bills to maintain the building, on their tax rate. David asked if Groton would have to pay for this at all and Terry said no, they would continue to do it how they are doing it now. It would be too complicated to try to change this. He said that to expand the school, for \$1.00 on the tax rate it will be paid off in a year. David asked if this cost would be to Groton as well. Terry said he doesn't think so but there is a lot to talk about still.

Peter asked Terry how soon they will have the numbers for our town. We are just looking at the bottom line for Groton's share. Virginia explained that right now they do not have the numbers until the discussions are complete. Terry will say that this will not reduce the taxes. John said that it is about stabilization. Virginia said that everyone here is a tax payer so they don't want their taxes to go up either. John said that with it being smaller, it would allow the Town to vote to make changes. Peter asked if there is a caveat in the contract. Terry said there is nothing under the table and there is nothing in stone right now but they are working hard on getting the numbers together. All three towns together pay 3.9 million dollars to go to SAU4 so it wouldn't cost more than that. They say it is 2.3-2.8 million dollars to run the school which allows 1.1 million dollars for the other stuff. Right now, they are just getting started.

There were no other questions or comments from the audience. John asked people to share their email addresses if they want to be on the email list. They will be having more meetings as they get more information.

Intent to Cut- Map 5 Lot- 132

The logger emailed in an intent to cut for Map 5 Lot 132 for a 40+/- acre cut. All the information is correct and no bond is required. **John motioned to sign the intent to cut for Map 5 Lot 132, Tony 2nd, so voted.**

Local septic approval- Map 1 Lot 100

The septic designer emailed in a Septic Plan and local approval for Map 1 Lot 100. All the information is correct. **John motioned to sign the local septic approval for Map 1 Lot 100, Tony 2nd, so voted.**

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS:

There were no questions or comments from the audience.

Having no other business to conduct, John motioned to adjourn at 8:04pm, Tony 2nd, so voted.

Respectfully Submitted,

Sara Smith
Administrative Assistant