

FINANCE COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES  
GILL MONTAGUE SENIOR CENTER  
62 FIFTH STREET, TURNERS FALLS, MA  
WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 2018  
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A quorum of the Montague Finance Committee was present at and participated in a meeting of Gill-Montague civic leaders convened by Gill Montague Regional School District (GMRSD) Superintendent Michael Sullivan. Jane Oakes, chair of the GMRSD School Committee, chaired the meeting.

- The meeting was opened at 6:32 pm. Michael Naughton called the Montague Finance Committee meeting to order at that time.
- **Montague Finance Committee members present:** Jen Audley, Fred Bowman, Michael Naughton, and Richard Widmer. Greg Garrison, John Hanold and Chris Menegoni were absent.
- **Others present:** GMRSD School Committee members: Jane Oakes, Timmie Smith (nb: also a member of the Gill Finance Committee), Jennifer Lively; GMRSD administration: Superintendent Michael Sullivan, Business Manager Joanne Blier, Director of Teaching and Learning Christine Limoges; Gill Selectboard: John Ward, Greg Snedeker; Gill Finance Committee: Tupper Brown, Claire Chang; Gill Town Administrator Ray Purington; Montague selectman Michael Nelson; Montague Town Administrator Steven Ellis; HEART<sup>1</sup> Committee members: Michele Giarusso (Leyden Municipal Assistant & HEART Committee chair), Ginger Robinson (Leyden Finance Committee), Sue O'Reilly McRae (PVRSD School Committee); State Senator-elect Jo Comerford; State Representative-elect Natalie Blais
- The meeting was not recorded.

## Introductions

Meeting members introduced themselves, as some of them were meeting each other for the first time.

## Discussion of Meeting Handout (GM fiscal situation and solutions.doc)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Honest Education And Retaining Trust, a committee formed by officials of the member towns of the Pioneer Valley Regional School District (PVRSD), along with school committee members.

<sup>2</sup> "GM fiscal situation and solutions.doc" included the "Open Letter from Gill-Montague Civic Leaders" that had previously been endorsed by the group, GMRSD, and the member towns. Selections from the Data Sheet that accompanied the Open Letter, specifically the pages for Gill and Montague, along with the final page, were also handed out at this meeting.

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Dr. Sullivan briefly went over the handout that he had distributed at the beginning of the meeting.

- Part 1 described the fiscal challenges that the district has faced in the period since FY11. The main fiscal challenge is that increases in state education aid have not kept pace with growth in the district's budget, and as a result the member towns have had to increase their contributions and the district has had to make staff and other reductions. The district has also been challenged by declining enrollment, and having both a small enrollment and a high proportion of economically disadvantaged students presents its own special challenges.
- Part 2 was the Open Letter regarding the Chapter 70 formula "cap" on local contributions. Tupper Brown gave a brief overview for those not already familiar with it. He noted that the net effect is that poorer towns are taxed at a higher rate to pay for education than richer towns.
- Part 3 was a discussion of the recent Foundation Budget Review Commission's recommendations and how they relate to GMRSD. He presented figures showing that the gaps between the foundation budget and GMRSD's spending for both employee benefits and for special education are significantly higher than they are for larger districts.
- Part 4 was an argument, with supporting data, that small districts have significantly higher per-pupil costs than larger districts. Dr. Sullivan explained that he developed this idea after studying the Rural School Aid proposal championed by Mohawk Regional School District Superintendent Michal Buoniconti. Dr. Sullivan realized that small enrollment, rather than population density, might be a better indicator of the need for higher per-pupil costs, and he has begun trying to draw attention to that insight.
- Part 5 was a brief overview of current efforts by GMRSD and its neighbors, specifically the Efficiency and Regionalization Project and the Powertown in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Project.

Following Dr. Sullivan's presentation, there was a general discussion of financial and other challenges faced by GMRSD and the towns in the areas served by Senator-elect Comerford and Representative-elect Blais. Along with the areas covered by Dr. Sullivan, school choice, charter schools, the need for broadband and economic development, and the desirability of a rail line along the Route 2 corridor were discussed.

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Senator-elect Comerford noted that she had campaigned on “education, health care, the environment, and revenue”, and told the group that they were “preaching to the converted”. Representative-elect Blais said that there will be a number of newly-elected members in the next session, calling it “a very progressive class”. Speaking of Ms. Comerford and her fellow legislators, Ms. Blais said that she feels part of “a very strong team”.

Greg Snedeker noted that there will be a Small Town Summit on January 10 at 7:00 pm at the Gill Town Hall, where the focus will be on the state’s education funding.

No motions were made, and no votes were taken.

No date was set for a next meeting.

**Meeting adjourned at 8:35 PM**

**List of Documents and Exhibits:**

- GM fiscal situation and solutions.doc
- Data Sheet Attachment to GMRSD Civic Leaders Letter (8-18).xlsx