

STRPB INFORMATIONAL UPDATE – NOT A WARRANT ARTICLE

Six Town Regional Planning Board's Report Prepared for 2025 Annual Town Meeting

The Six Town Regionalization Planning Board (STRPB) was formed by the towns of Bernardston, Gill, Leyden, Montague, Northfield and Warwick to research the feasibility of creating a new regional school district that was affordable, sustainable and educationally advantageous for our students. Eighteen members, three from each town, were appointed to serve. The board also includes one non-voting member from the Town of Erving, and does its best to keep the Town of Vernon, VT informed. Both Vernon and Erving have a long history of tuitioning students into the Pioneer and Gill-Montague school districts.

The STRPB convened its first "in-person" meeting in November of 2019, followed by the Covid 19 epidemic. This outbreak, along with other unanticipated obstacles, considerably extended the planning board's research timeline.

With the support of grants from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and the Department of Revenue (DOR), the services of the Massachusetts Association of Regional Schools Consulting Group (MARSG), the Abrahams Group and Mary Broderick, an educational facilitator specialist were secured to investigate the educational and financial impacts of forming a new "super-regional pre-k through 12 district" by combining the Pioneer Valley and Gill Montague Regional School Districts with the possibility of Erving and Vernon (VT) tuitioning in their 7-12 students. Although Warwick has formed its own school district, it continues to be an interested and active partner in this research.

The Planning Board concluded its research in December 2023. The findings of the research were clear. The benefits gained throughout all programs and services by combining the middle and high school enrollments would be significant. Just some of these benefits include an increase in the following: course offerings, approaches to learning, athletic teams (and the ability to field teams), support for students with disabilities, professional development and collaboration, clubs and afterschool programs, and more. With the increase in enrollment and teachers, some of the benefits found for teachers would be more colleagues in and outside their certification areas for collaboration on curriculum design and approaches to learning, more opportunities for specialized courses and cross/interdisciplinary work, and professional development. In response to these findings, the STRPB voted in January 2024 to move forward with drafting a proposed regional agreement (RA).

In the Spring of 2024, the STRPB appointed a District Regional Agreement Subcommittee (DRAS) to craft a new regional agreement for the six towns to consider in the Fall of 2025 (October/November), if feasible. Members of the DRAS were recommended by each town's Selectboard and appointed by the Planning Board. For the basis of its work, the DRAS utilized the 2017 proposed regional agreement that was developed by the Honest Education and Retaining Trust (HEART) Committee, which was formed by the selectboards of Bernardston, Leyden, Northfield and Warwick.

Currently, the DRAS is working with the MARS Consulting Group in finalizing a draft proposed regional agreement to recommend to the STRPB for its consideration and review. Once the planning board completes its review and approves the RA it will undergo a technical legal review to ensure it complies with state laws and regulations. It will also be sent to the Selectboards for their initial review. Any feedback from the attorney will be shared with Selectboards when the legal review is completed and we recommend Selectboards have their town counsels review the document once the technical review has been completed or collectively assign one to do this work.

Other Post Employment Benefits (OPEB) obligations will be calculated and shared with the towns for informational purposes. Additionally, legal services would be required to identify all regional school district assets of buildings and property in the existing districts and these would be transferred to the new district through special legislation.

It is our hope that the Planning Board will secure another grant to hire a firm to assist in holding multiple public forums and other pathways of communications so voters understand the complexities and potential of the newly formed super-regional school district. An aggressive timeline would be for the towns to schedule special town meetings on the same day in November for voters to consider creating a new district by approving the proposed Regional Agreement. If the RA is approved in all six towns it then will be forwarded to the Commissioner of Education for approval.

Finally, an eighteen-month transition period would be necessary for the new school committee and transition superintendent to complete the associated tasks required. If the tasks noted above are completed within that timeframe, the new school district would begin operations in July 2027. We respectfully ask that each town provide a few minutes for a member of the STRPB to give an update on what to expect in the coming months. Please contact Greg Snedeker at strpboffc@gmail.com regarding this request.

For more detailed STRPB information please visit our website: <https://6towns.org/>

Respectfully submitted,

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Greg Snedeker, STRPB Vice-Chair/Secretary/Treasurer