

REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT Amherst, Pelham, Leverett and Shutesbury YES or NO?

LAST WEEK WE HELD A FORUM AND HAD 69 PEOPLE SIGN IN, and others joined the meeting later. We had a good turn out here in Shutesbury. **TOMORROW, there is a meeting in Amherst where the 12 Regional School District Planning Board members will gather and take a vote whether they will make a recommendation for their own town to either not regionalize, regionalize preK-6, or regionalize preK-12.**

Your three representatives, Becky Torres, Elaine Puleo and Michael deChiara will be voting on their recommendation Saturday morning. If two or three of the members from one town vote to withdraw from the process further discussion will be had about how the remaining towns can move forward.

This raises another issue we do not have a concrete answer for. If one town does not move forward and the other towns do, what happens to that town? Do you have any concerns about not being part of a 4 town region that includes the elementary school when the rest of our current regional towns do belong?

Why are we looking at this issue again? The report that was done in 2009 was never taken to a vote. The recommendation at that time was that the 4 towns create one union preK-6. Over the last 10 years we have seen a decline of state aid for education. Shutesbury now receives \$584,000 in elementary school state aid. For many years state aid would increase year by year and help us keep up with increasing expenses and increasing unfunded mandates like MCAS testing, evaluations and core curriculum standards. As town officials it is clear to us that we have been able to fund our elementary school as we have because for a time our enrollment totals in the 7-12 grades were declining faster than our neighbors in the region. That meant that our assessments for the regional school did not increase for about 5 years. That is changing now. This year our assessment increase is \$58,000. Next year it will likely be closer to \$100,000 and remain higher for a number of years. That will leave little for our elementary school. We are exploring regionalization in search of a way to make the whole system sustainable.

We know that funding education on the back of property taxes is tricky business. We learned during two years of work, 2010 to 2011 as the Shutesbury Educational Study Committee that Pelham pays 3% of their budget for administrative costs while Leverett and Shutesbury pay 6-8%. We needed to learn if Shutesbury could also see savings in our elementary school costs if we join the same system with Amherst. While there are some the Consultant's financial report does not show significant cost savings. We have learned that capital building projects like roof repairs get a higher reimbursement if you are a region then if you are not. And new assessment formula(s) would be crafted if a new region was created.

So my final question for you is, Do you feel like you need questions answered before closing the door on the idea of regionalization or would you be comfortable dropping the subject now?

Please share your thoughts. Thanks so much- Becky Torres

We have received a few questions and comments. On such an important issue we would love to get your concerns if you have them. There is a list of questions and answers on the website listed below.

EDUCATIONAL AND FINANCIAL CONSULTANTS' REPORTS are available on line at <http://www.RegionalSchoolPlanning.info>

Regionalization Analysts, Malcolm Reid and Marc Abrahams presented their findings on Educational and Financial Impacts of the four towns forming either a new pre-K-6 Region or a pre-K-12 Region in a public session last Saturday, 2/2/13. Copies of the report are available at the library and town hall. If you have any questions please call and ask your questions.

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

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WIREDWEST UPDATE This is a report from the Executive Director of Wired west, Monica Webb. Please let me know if you have any questions.

Newsletter from Wired West Executive Board:

WiredWest March 2013 Update

The last 12 months were busy for WiredWest, and included the addition of 16 new towns to the Cooperative, bringing the current membership to 42 towns working together to create a long-term, comprehensive solution to the problem of inadequate broadband access.

Business Planning

Significant work has been undertaken to enable financing and buildout of the network. In the spring of 2012, WiredWest conducted a comprehensive market survey in member towns. The survey provided detailed information on residents' usage of existing services, and appetite for new services. The results indicated strong demand for the network and provided guidance on potential service offerings.

Last fall WiredWest launched a Support Card Campaign in its member towns. The information will be used in network design and to provide assurances to potential financing sources. The campaign is continuing into the first quarter of 2013 and residents and businesses that have not yet completed a Card are urged to do so at www.wiredwest.net as soon as possible.

WiredWest has developed comprehensive pro-forma financial statements with input from other municipal fiber networks and financial expertise, and has met with public and private financing sources to put the project on track for financing in 2013.

Network Planning

To complete the engineering work required for financing, a GIS database was created for WiredWest towns, and potential network distribution locations in each town were evaluated. An engineering firm provided high level network design and cost estimates to WiredWest and the options are being reviewed to create final estimates for our pro-forma financial statements.

FY 2013 Plans

WiredWest will be focused on finalizing the business plan including the pro-forma financial statements, final network design and other information needed for financing.

WiredWest will also continue working with financing sources to determine the best and most expedient strategy for financing the network. We will continue to solicit grants and donations for interim funding, and will be completing an economic impact study to quantify the regional economic impact of the network. If you are interested in staying abreast of developments, we encourage you to visit the WiredWest website to join our email list or follow WiredWest on Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter.

Clarifications Regarding Service on the Massachusetts Broadband Institute Network

WiredWest has received a number of inquiries about service on the state's fiber-optic network, MBI 123, which is lighting up in Western Massachusetts beginning this March. The MBI 123 middle-mile network was built to serve as wholesale backhaul for last-mile networks and to connect Community Anchor Institutions (CAIs). It will not serve homes and businesses directly.

The MBI's fiber is similar to a high-voltage power line, in that getting fiber-optic connectivity to homes and businesses from the MBI network will require a separate, last-mile distribution network. Even if the MBI network passes by your home or business, access will only be available to you after routing through a *last-mile* fiber network which would wire fiber back to your premises.

A last mile fiber network typically connects to users via centrally-located facilities, where the necessary equipment can be placed in a secure, protected area with backup power. In WiredWest's case, those facilities would be located in most town centers.

The MBI 123 network *will* be offering service to CAIs, which **[includes the town hall, library, police and fire stations, school and health care facilities. Our library offers free wireless access, so residents can utilize the MBI 123 network there.]**

This is another reason the WiredWest network is critical for our communities. The state has created a state-of-the-art fiber-optic highway in our region. Now it's up to us to build the last-mile "off-ramps," creating a robust network from end-to-end that finally connects the unconnected, and provides our citizens with access to affordable, reliable and high-capacity broadband.