

In My View

H.883 is a costly step in the wrong direction

By Heidi Spear

Massive school governance consolidation without cost benefit analysis or clearly stated goals for expanded opportunities would be a costly step in the wrong direction.

Over the past 15 years, education spending in Vermont has ballooned to the point that we are now spending \$1.5 billion and consuming 47 percent of all state and local revenues. Our leadership is now debating raising more revenues through a greater tax burden or whittling away crucial dollars for our most vulnerable citizens, while they continue to turn their backs on the responsibility to reform the beast of their own making. For some reason, completely beyond, well, reason, our executive and legislative leadership remains unconvinced that there is an urgent problem with education funding in Vermont. Next year, they say.

Instead of allocating real energy to fixing this problem, Shap and friends are fixated on a plan for massive school governance consolidation. Somehow, perhaps thanks to the full-time lobbying of the Vermont Superintendents Association, reducing independent oversight of school budgets by 50 percent to upwards of 90 percent and consolidating power in the hands of superintendents has gotten on the front burner.

Now, I am not one who thinks we must and should live or die by our current governance models, those defined in the distant past. However, as a means to reduce our spending, increase accountability, or improve op-

portunities, H.883, a plan with zero clarity about what opportunities we will expand to compel our effort, no design or metrics for efficiencies to inform our alignment, and no cost benefit analysis to prioritize our investments, is worse than an empty gesture. This is another cart-before-the-horse cram down with deadlines but no substance. It isn't enough to have grand ideals and high hopes. As anyone with actual business experience can tell you, success depends upon execution.

As evidenced by the assembly of K-12 districts whose budgets failed this year, consolidated budgets and governance doesn't necessarily translate to lower costs, better outcomes, or sufficient transparency or accountability. There is a tremendously high-level leap of faith that reducing the number of districts from 270 to 45 to 55 would automatically translate to better things for kids, taxpayers, or for the communities they hail from. First off, we don't even agree on what expanded opportunities are a priority - what excellent education looks and feels like. And, truly, must we?

Experts in the field of education have stated repeatedly that a consolidation plan should not be implemented with any expectation of considerable cost savings, but legislators seem to view them as inevitable. Since when is efficiency just inevitable when you grow a bigger organization? When you undermine accountability for the dollars spent you certainly won't help this efficiency come to pass. H.883 includes

zero provisions or guidance to facilitate let alone ensure cost reduction. Despite this fact, for those who follow this prescription for consolidation on the jiffy, you can get grants of \$20k and \$50k - all at the discretion of the central powers that be. You could spin your wheels entirely, you could spend more on higher labor contracts and cut no staff at all, but we would have invested in you and your totally unrealized potential. The bill raids the Special Fund of \$4 million for these purposes. This plan, passed unanimously by the House Education Committee, jettisons fiscal accountability by doling out free money (grants don't count in the education spending that factors into the tax formula) on the basis of nothing more than just falling in line.

What is certain, regardless of the downstream potential of some efficiency gain, is that a massive consolidation effort will drive costs up, not down, for the foreseeable future. There are very real barriers to the proposed consolidation - not just lack of community buy-in. This effort would require investments in infrastructure and staffing. Resources that could be focused on identifying shared resources and purchasing efficiencies

or facilitating right sizing efforts to contain actual spending would instead be heavily occupied with accounting systems migrations and changing all employment contracts. Labor costs would settle up, not down, as contracts get unified. Central office staff would be tasked with change management, stewarding the bloody, divisive process of consolidating the budgets and governing boards themselves, instead of remaining focused on such things as, um, educating students. The AOE offered preliminary H.883 cost estimates of \$11 million, exclusive of higher costs at the agency to guide and oversee the consolidation.

Further, we should be abundantly clear and give ample consideration to the fact that eliminating town school districts would be a game changer in Vermont. This move would disenfranchise a great many involved parents and community members in a process that more, not fewer, of us should be involved in. Town Meeting as most of us know it would be a thing of the past as town presentations and reviews of local school budgets would be replaced with Australian ballots for a single, much larger budget that crosses voting districts.

While centralization of control and oversight might seem appealing to some, I have to question the sanity of this move with current state-level performance. The Agency of Education employs 155 people and spends a budget of over \$24 million, up 10 percent from FY13. This spending level is equal to almost \$90,000 per current district (not all of them operating schools) or \$400,000 for each of our current supervisory unions and supervisory districts. I am not sure they have much to teach us about efficiency.

It appears it will take the engagement of our citizenry to stop our legislators from sidestepping key concerns of voters, and ignoring basic management best practices while mandating sweeping change. Absent our voices, we will be embarking on another costly venture spending precious few resources well beyond regional norms and our own means. If you also take issue with this legislation, please consider signing the petition to oppose H.883 at <http://www.credomobilize.com/petitions/defend-local-education-in-vermont>.

Heidi Spear is chair of the Fayston School Board.

View - Czaplinski

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will be hard to transform. It won't be easy going back to railroads, designing smart, sustainable communities where we drive less and walk more, build smaller homes and fewer structures, convert existing structures, and use the earth to cool us in the summer and warm us in the winter. It is hard to see how we will produce less, buy less and transport goods shorter distances. Perhaps a very small and encouraging step is now occurring in the growing local food movement.

If, in fact, we do what needs to be done, we run into the problem of economic growth and whether there can be a different kind of growth while reducing fossil fuel energy consumption.

It seems that the question for the towns of Warren and Waitsfield is, How will each community reduce its fossil fuel consumption by an equivalent amount or more of the solar energy to be installed so that total energy use does not continue to increase as it has over the last 20 years? Can a small community take

this larger step without cooperation and teamwork at the state, national and international levels?

Richard Czaplinski lives in Warren.

P.S. A clarifying note on power (kilowatts, kw) and energy (kilowatt-hours, kwh). Power is the rate at which energy is generated. Energy is power (kw) times time (h). The units used in the article to describe the total estimated energy produced in each community should be kwh per year, not kw per year. R.C.

TOWN OF WARREN PUBLIC NOTICE Warren Development Review Board

The Warren Development Review Board has scheduled a public hearing at 7:00 PM, Monday, April 21st, 2014 at the Warren Municipal Building to consider the following application.

Application 2014-8-CU. Request to locate a temporary structure in the Warren Fluvial Erosion Hazard Overlay District (FEH). The applicant Bobbin Mill Real Estate requests permission to lease a portion of its property for the construction of prefabricated state highway bridge. The lessee, Luck Bros. Inc proposes a six month term for the placement of a construction trailer and use of an assembly area for the structure. The property is located at 209 Bobbin Mill Road and is in the Bobbin Mill Commercial District.

Application 2014-8-PUD Request for a three lot PUD. The applicants L Macrae & Roberta Rood request a Final Plan Approval Hearing for a 3 lot Subdivision /PUD at 960 Fuller Hill Rd. The 16.5 acre parcel is located in the Rural Residential and Meadowland Overlay Districts. The applicants request that the proposed PUD be reviewed under the Rural Standards for an Upland Enclave

All applications will be reviewed the Warren Land Use and Development Regulations as adopted by the Warren Select Board on March 25, 2008 and last amended November 11, 2012.

Pursuant to 24 V.S.A. §§ 4464(a)(1)(C) and 4471(a), participation in this local proceeding is a prerequisite to the right to take any subsequent appeal. A project description, application materials, and site plans for this project are available for public review at the Planning and Zoning/Warren Town Clerk's Office during regular office hours. If you have any questions regarding this application/hearing, please do not hesitate to contact the Planning and Zoning Office located in the Conference Room (old library) of the Warren Municipal Building at 42 Cemetery Road in Warren Village

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