

**Lamoille North Modified Unified Union School District
Informational Meeting: Merger Acceptance Vote
February 11, 2019**

Superintendent Catherine Gallagher started the meeting at 6:00 p.m. Gallagher then asked that Vice Chair Nielsen allow Mr. Nash to offer a public comment.

Nash explained that Cambridge had twice voted down having the elementary school join the LNMUUSD. Cambridge first turned down the proposed merger on April 12, 2016 by a vote of 164 no votes and 128 yes votes. Act 46 provided incentives to merge if they merged voluntarily and penalties if towns did not merge. Once those incentives and penalties were better understood, the Cambridge School Board asked the voters of Cambridge to reconsider the merger. There was a second vote on March 7, 2017. Cambridge voters again said no, with 309 no votes and 219 yes votes. This was a more emphatic no. Additionally voter turnout increased by 80%. A recent amendment extended the deadline from July 1, 2019 to July 1, 2020 for schools that had not yet merged with their neighbors. Nash listed the towns that fell under this amendment. Cambridge was now in a unique position because the February 19th vote had already been scheduled, thus likely sealing Cambridge's fate. Nash asked the Board why they were hurrying to merge. Nash then formally requested that the Board not go against the expressed wishes of Cambridge voters and that it cancel the merger vote scheduled for February 19th.

Gallagher then asked that the Board members and administrators to stand for the pledge of allegiance. Gallagher recognized Peter Ingvaldstad who was the Chair of the Act 46 Study Committee and the person who spearheaded the creation of the Articles of Agreement. Paul Guiliani was also in attendance via phone.

Gallagher explained that the decision of whether the MUUSD electorate would accept the Cambridge School District as a full member would be made by the voters, not by any boards or the Central Office. Act 46 was not initiated by any boards or superintendents, but by the work that had been done by the Legislature. Act 46 encouraged school districts to merge and to provide a quality education with a variety of educational opportunities to all Vermont students at a cost to parents and taxpayers that maximized operational efficiencies and flexibility to manage and share all resources and to slow the growth of education spending.

Gallagher stated she had heard a number of questions and comments about merging. She explained that a House or Senate vote was not enforceable until signed into law. What was currently in place was the State Board of Education's final plan that compelled merger. There were some districts that chose to be part of a class action suit and those districts were asked by their communities to do so. Boards could never make the decision to be part of a lawsuit on their own. Gallagher also noted that a comment on Front Porch Forum stated that Cambridge students would have to be transported much longer distances to other schools. Gallagher explained that Cambridge had the largest student population and it would be financially irresponsible, at the very least, to render that school inoperable. The Cambridge Board had had Act 46 on their monthly agenda for years, which allowed for public input. The Board had one meeting in the last two years attended by the public for comment. The MUUSD had had no public attendance to discuss Act 46.

Gallagher stated the Cambridge Board Chair, the Business Manager and the Superintendent had attended a meeting at the formal request of Rebecca Holcombe. Mark Stebbins advocated for the Cambridge community. This was met with the statement that Cambridge had declining enrollment year after year and was not poised to stand alone and was well poised to join the Union, as Grades 7-12 were already participating.

Gallagher explained that over the past two years they had aligned curriculum for PreK-grade 6 so that one board with representatives from every town worked with administration to make sure they were providing students with a common framework upon entering middle school. Three MUUSD elementary schools had added enrichment programs and opportunities. Resources were being shared. An in-district transfer policy was in place for students to attend other schools in the MUUSD outside their town of residence. Gallagher then provided details on Board members and staff who had been invited to contribute on state committees, and outlined programs that the District was piloting.

Business Manager Deb Clark then explained what a **yes vote** would mean:

- 1) That Cambridge would become a full PreK-12 member of Lamoille North Unified Union School District (UUSD);
- 2) The PreK-12 tax rate for Cambridge would reflect the tax rate reductions under Act 46 for the two remaining years for which the LNMUUSD was currently eligible; 4 cents in 2020 and 2 cents in 2021;
- 3) The supervisory union structure would dissolve and the UUSD would become its own single-district SU; and
- 4) Grant funds would be available to facilitate the transition into a UUSD.

A **no vote** would mean that the three entities, Lamoille North SU, Lamoille North MUUSD, and Cambridge Elementary School District would continue unless and until:

- 1) Cambridge School District and LNMUUSD merged into a single UUSD pursuant to 16 V.S.A. 721;
- 2) The State Board of Education chose to expand the boundaries of Lamoille North SU so that it had more than its two current members pursuant to 16 V.S.A. 261;
- 3) The Legislature enacted legislation requiring some other specific change in the structure of the districts or the SU.

Clark then provided a high level overview of the FY20 budget. The combined education spending was budgeted at \$29,225,576. Clark provided information on the homestead tax rate and the common level of appraisal. If Cambridge were to merge, the homestead tax rate would increase from 1.508 to 1.512, less a \$0.01 increase.

Gallagher asked Guiliani to respond to Nash's question of whether the vote on the merger could be canceled. Guiliani stated it could only be cancelled by a vote of the majority of the Unified Union District Board.

A member of the public asked if the Cambridge tax rate would increase slightly while the other towns would decrease slightly. Clark stated that was correct.

Peter Ingvaldstad asked about the process involved for students who wished to transfer between schools and he asked what the reasons were for doing so. Gallagher stated that the in-district transfer policy was available on the website. Students had applied to attend other schools in the MUUSD. She stated no transportation was provided. Gallagher stated that occasionally students needed a fresh start in a new school. Other times families might move or parents worked in a town that they'd prefer their child to go to. The policy allowed for flexibility. Ingvaldstad asked if it were possible that some schools would become magnet schools. Gallagher stated that while some schools were seeing higher enrollments, she did not believe so.

A member of the public asked what would happen if Cambridge residents voted no but the other towns voted yes. Clark explained that the votes were co-mingled so the result would depend on total voter turnout.

A member of the public asked why the merger had to take place if Cambridge residents had voted no twice already. Clark explained that the State Board of Education had mandated the merger. In

response to a question, Gallagher stated that a class action suit might delay the action, but, as an example, Stowe was still moving forward and preparing for the possibility of a merger on July 1.

A Cambridge resident asked if her child would notice a difference if the school were to merge. David Manning, Principal at Johnson Elementary School, stated that neither the Johnson students nor the staff experienced a change in their day. The day-to-day operations were the same. Diane Reilly, Principal at Hyde Park, stated there was no change and each school was still unique. Melinda Mascolino, Principal at Eden, stated the positive changes were the access to IT, resulting in an increased level of technology, as well as access to the building maintenance staff. Laura Miller, a member of the Board, stated she was on the Budget Committee and one reason she was on that Committee was because she wanted to understand if money was spent differently since the merger. She noted that residents of Cambridge were concerned about the gifted and talented program and local bussing. Miller explained that Eden still had their own local bussing and Johnson had a program for foreign language and the Board had not asked the administrators to change or cut anything. Every school had what they needed.

Mark Schilling of Cambridge asked about the budget ballots he had received for the elementary and secondary school. Clark stated the elementary school ballot was for the Cambridge school budget. These would be voted on as was done in the past. Two things could happen following the February 19 vote. Either those budgets would remain the same or the budgets would be merged and another vote would take place. Clark explained that a vote on the merged ballot was required because there was a 30-day window for a petition for reconsideration of the February 19th vote to be filed. In response to a question, Guiliani stated the petition would need to be signed by 5% of the District voters.

Sam Lotto asked if Act 46 was saving money. Clark stated they were starting to see the potential for savings in shared functions. The centralization of finance and the sharing of maintenance resources were two examples. The FY20 budget was starting to show some of those savings.

Gallagher asked the MUUSD Board members what changes they had noticed. Whitcomb stated that when you had a local board you knew what was going on. He said that with this Board, each principal made a report at the MUUSD Board meetings and you could hear what was going on in each town. There was certainly a change, but it was something the Legislature had created. Nielsen stated he agreed with Whitcomb there was a loss of local control but there were ways around that. He stated that Johnson had created a parent/teacher group. Nielsen hoped that Cambridge voted to merge. Nielsen also noted that he was disappointed that the State had pushed the target dates.

Brian Schaffer, Principal at LUHS, stated it was important to think of the concept of my-versus-all. Prior to the merger, town school boards were only concerned about their own students. Over the course of the inception of the LNMUUSD and now that things were starting to hum, the focus of the MUUSD Board was on all students. The focus needed to be on all students through all grade levels. Structures might change, leadership might change, but the focus was always on all the students and the opportunities they could have.

A member of the public asked what would happen for students if the result of the vote were not to merge. Clark stated nothing would change for the students. Nielsen stated that no one really knew and there was no clear direction from the State. Whitcomb stated the Legislature had not thought Act 46 through before voting on it.

Sam Lotto asked if the MUUSD votes were co-mingled. Clark stated they were. Lotto asked if all towns paid for capital repairs if they were needed. Clark said yes; however, based on a calculation two years ago of tax rates against grand lists, the entire Supervisory Union raised only about 50% of the budget from local taxes. The rest of the funding came from other State sources.

In response to a question from the public, Gallagher explained that what increased the best outcomes for the students would be that they all have the same foundational framework in literacy, math and science, and language arts. Gallagher noted that now, in general, there was less truancy and less behavioral referrals. It appeared that students were feeling more comfortable and able to access education. When a student felt safer in their environment they were open to being engaged in learning.

Jan Sanders asked for more information on lawsuits pertaining to Act 46 and work being done pro-bono. Whitcomb explained there was an attorney who was doing pro-bono work and advising lawyers who were currently working on the lawsuits. Giuliani explained three separate lawsuits were initiated challenging different aspects of Act 46. Giuliani had reviewed the complaints and they were well thought out. There were some serious constitutional issues at hand. However, no one could predict the outcome. Gallagher added that no Board would move forward with a class action without being given that input from his or her community. A Board would not pursue an action on its own. Giuliani agreed.

Clark informed the public there would be a LNMUUSD budget meeting on February 25, 2019. The Cambridge budget meeting would be held on March 4, 2019. The MUUSD Annual Meeting would be held on February 18, 2019.

Nielsen ended the meeting at 7:03 p.m.

Submitted by Sue Trainor