

LNSU/LNMUUSD Board Meeting
January 8, 2024
Minutes of Meeting

Board Members Present: Belvidere: Stephanie Sweet; Cambridge: Mark Stebbins, Sue Prescott, Amy Listenik, Jan Sander, Christy Liddy, Denise Webster; Eden: Jeff Hunsberger, David Whitcomb (phone); Hyde Park: Patti Hayford, Lisa Barry, Tina Lowe; Johnson: Mark Nielsen, Allen Audette, Katie Orost, Angela Lamell, Monica Stearns; Waterville: Bart Bezio

Board Members Absent: Hyde Park: Philip Kiely

Administrators Present: Catherine Gallagher, Deb Clark, Michele Aumand, Betzi Goodman, David Manning, Jan Epstein, Denise Maurice, Bethann Pirie, Mary Anderson, Diane Reilly, Rene Thibault, Dylan Laflam, Erik Remmers, Jeremy Scannell, Blake Nemeth

Members of the Public: There were over 25 individuals. Those who spoke have been mentioned below.

Minute Taker: Sue Trainor

Call to Order, Approval of the Agenda, Announcements and Public Comment: Nielsen called the meeting to order at 6:01 p.m. The agenda was amended to move the GMTCC FY25 Budget Review to below the Consent Agenda Items and remove the Business Student's Presentation. Stebbins made a motion, seconded by Hunsberger, to approve the amended agenda. The motion passed unanimously.

All those speaking as part of the Public Comment were addressing the GMTCC's proposal to combine the Forestry and Agriculture programs. Meghan Luther, Forestry Management Instructor, and Sam Rowley, Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems Instructor, spoke on behalf of their programs. They both noted the strong support for each of their programs. Their written statements can be found at the end of these minutes.

Amanda Tilton-Martin, a 3rd generation farmer in Lamoille County, spoke of the disconnect of current and future generations from agriculture and the practices involved in growing and processing their food. This program was important to promote agriculture and to allow the natural resources to be used by the school community.

Doug Boardman had taught at the Forestry and Farm Programs. He stated both programs were award winning. The Forestry Program seemed to be exclusively Hazen Union students and he wondered if Orleans South could pay for the program. He noted that this was the only district with a working farm. The elementary schools brought their students to the farm and the farm to school food program was a tremendous resource.

Mark Luneau, a former Forestry instructor at GMTCC, noted how important and valuable the two instructors were. Both of the program instructors had a lot of connections. He noted that this coming year's enrollment looked good for forestry. Both the Hardwick and Jeffersonville facilities blended in well with their communities.

A former student (unfortunately unable to hear her name) spoke about how important the farm program had been for her.

Dana Jourdan was an electrical instructor at GMTCC for ten years and had the opportunity to work at both sites with both instructors. He said it was completely life changing for students to attend these programs. Jourdan praised Rowley for what he was able to accomplish. There had always been fluctuations in student enrollment and he thought the numbers could change next year. Jourdan encouraged Board members to walk through each site to see what had been built by these instructors.

Another former student (unfortunately unable to hear her name) spoke, stating that Mr. Rowley had been her teacher. She struggled sitting at a desk all day. Being outside and having pride in what she was doing was life changing. She would not have been able to graduate if she were not in the program.

Kenneth Grant, a welder, fabricator, and former teacher at Lyndon Institute stated that these programs were the envy of any other agriculture and forestry school. They should not be allowed to fall through the cracks.

Holly Ferris, a Cambridge resident, and an employee of UVM extension, echoed everything that had been said.

Diane Reilly, Principal at Hyde Park Elementary, stated she had been working with Rowley for many years on field trips. Reilly was astounded and proud to be working in a district where students could be taken to a farm. She greatly appreciated the agriculture program and asked where elementary schools would be able to go if these programs were eliminated.

LNSU/LNMUUSD Routine Business: Consent Agenda Items

Minutes of November 133, 2023, LNSU/LNMUUSD Special Board Meeting, Curriculum Committee Meeting, Finance & Capital Committee Meeting and Social/Racial Justice Committee meeting; Minutes of December 5, 2023, and December 13, 2023, Finance & Capital Committee Meeting.

Sander made a motion, seconded by Hunsberger, to approve the minutes. The motion passed unanimously.

Board Orders: Bezio recommended that the Board approve the Board Orders noted on the agenda. Stebbins made a motion, seconded by Lamell, to approve the Board Orders. The motion passed unanimously.

GMTCC FY25 Budget Review and Possible Adoption: Remmers first explained that the RAB had recommended the changes to the forestry and agriculture programs strictly as a way to deal with the budget issues facing the Tech Center. It was not a reflection on the programs. Without any remediation, the budget was coming in at \$4,009,634, an 11.5% increase. This meant that the FY25 tuition per pupil would increase from \$23,000 in FY24 to \$29,000 in FY25. The FY25 per pupil tuition from the sending schools would go from \$10,082 to \$13,101, an increase of \$3,000 per student over last year. Last year the increase over the previous year was \$682.

Salaries and benefits would increase \$111,000 each, 52% of the total increase. These were fixed costs based on the Master Agreement. Maintenance and IT supplies would increase \$80,000. The SU assessment would increase \$60,000. The cost for supplies, such as goods and services used for instruction, were expected to increase by \$64,000. The engineering program starting next year would primarily be paid for by a state grant.

The six-semester average was declining from 130.2 to 128.17 now. Because of the loss of some enrollment, the state aid would reduce. In order to improve enrollment, GMTCC was increasing their marketing and outreach efforts, advertising sponsorships, offering extensive college credits, having events to welcome the broader community into the school, and bringing middle school students in to view their opportunities at GMTCC.

The 2023 enrollment figures from sending schools were: 38 students from Hazen, 2 students from Stowe, 19 students from Peoples Academy, 4 students from Craftsbury, 5 homeschooled students, and 58 students from Lamoille. Remmers wanted to be sure to point out that Stowe was working to change the narrative around career tech education.

The RAB recommendation was to reduce FY25 expenses to a 7-8% increase by combining the Forestry and Agriculture programs into one Natural Resources program, reduce one Natural Resources position, operate the Natural Resources program at the Hardwick campus, and close the farm in Jeffersonville. The RAB also recommended using FY23's budgetary excess of \$28,331 as revenue along with \$43,219 from the tuition reserve.

Remmers noted that the 5-year average enrollment for agriculture students was 6.2 and 6.4 in forestry. These represented two of the lowest average enrollments of the programs offered at GMTCC.

Making these recommended changes would reduce the FY25 budget to \$3,882,185 or a 7.96% increase. This would be a difference of \$286,193 over last year's budget. The announced tuition would be \$2,000 less than the preliminary budget. The per pupil tuition from sending schools would be \$11,548 as opposed to \$13,101.

Joe Ciccolo, Chair of RAB, noted it had been a long and difficult conversation to have. Ciccolo believed that this was not necessarily a permanent situation, and that by consolidating and bringing in more students the program could be expanded in the future. He noted that when per pupil increases occurred, sending schools sent less students to the tech center.

Stebbins asked if any of the programs were steadily rising. Remmers stated some of the programs seeing steady increases over the past few years were allied health, networking, and technical programs. From year to year the enrollment figures varied.

Gallagher asked if all of the sending schools had sent their students to participate in a tour. Remmers stated that Peoples Academy had not. Sander noted that years ago sending schools lost state aid money when sending students to GMTCC. Remmers stated there was some momentum in this legislative session to make changes which could have an impact on the funding mechanism for career technical education. Remmers noted something needed to change, as GMTCC was not the only tech center to have these issues.

Sander expressed her support for the farm program, stating it was very important at the elementary level. It would impact Cambridge students negatively and she hated to lose this resource. She noted that since COVID, students didn't seem as interested in a 4-year college. Sander thought more attention and money should be put into vocational education rather than reducing programs.

Hunsberger asked whether there were other collaborative partnerships available to help bridge the gap between the program revenue. Specifically, he asked whether Salvation Farms could help or whether legislative members could be helpful. Remmers stated GMTCC relied on a lot of grants. Hunsberger noted the CSA movement was now huge and he wondered if it was possible to take advantage of that.

Stebbins stated that having seen the student count, the 9th and 10th grades were larger than the current 11th and 12th grade. With the increased marketing and larger numbers of students, it was possible more students would attend in a year or two. It could just be a matter of having to bridge between now and future enrollments. In response to a question about enrollment numbers, Remmers stated that they were not operating the first year of the forestry program due to lack of enrollment. There were currently eight applicants for the forestry program next year. The agriculture program currently had five students along with three additional applications to attend next year. The application process still had six more months to go.

Prescott, noting there were a number of new Board members, asked that Remmers explain what RAB was. She also noted that historically the School Board approved the budget that the RAB brought forward. Remmers outlined who made up the Board and noted that RAB was an advisory board and the actual authority and final decision-making resided with the School Board.

Bezio stated he believed they owed it to the staff to give this decision more time. He urged the Board to move the decision to next meeting's agenda. Remmers was asked to provide more information on trend lines, the towns the current students came from, and trendlines on all of the programs.

Nielsen stated that if the Board believed in the budget and these programs, it was the Board's job to sell the need to the public. Orost stated it was the RAB's job to tell the Board what they recommended. She believed the Board should honor what the RAB had submitted. Prescott asked if there were other programs in the past that had been let go. Remmers stated they had not let any go since he had been at GMTCC.

Ratify Support Staff Master Agreement: Prescott made a motion, seconded by Hayford, to enter into Executive Session to discuss the ratification of the Support Staff Master Agreement. Gallagher and Clark were invited to attend. The Board unanimously approved the motion and the Board went into Executive Session at 7:17 p.m.

The Board came out of Executive Session at 7:29 p.m. Prescott made a motion, seconded by Hunsberger, to ratify the Support Staff Master Agreement as tentatively agreed. The motion passed unanimously, with Bezio, Hayford, Stebbins, and Lowe abstaining.

Winooski Valley Regional Public School Choice Collaborative: Gallagher asked the Board's approval to be part of the School Choice Collaborative under Act 129 and authorize Nielsen to sign the collaborative agreement. Hunsberger made a motion to approve and Barry seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

In-District Transfers: Gallagher stated the in-district transfer policy stated the Superintendent could make a decision to transfer a student at any point in time. This was hard to do when the policy stated you needed a good reason not to do it. Gallagher did not believe it was a good policy as written. She did not feel the request was always a student-driven issue but rather it was more of a parent-driven issue. Gallagher asked the Board to state there would not be any reconsiderations between now and the end of the year for in-district transfers. If a parent wanted to appeal the decision they could come before the Board. Hunsberger made a motion, seconded by Hayford, to approve Gallagher's request that there would not be any in-district transfers for the remainder of this school year. Gallagher would provide a revised policy to the Board at a later meeting. The motion passed unanimously.

Central Office Lease Bid: Laflam started with the bond update, stating that because of Act 76 it appeared the State was looking at lifting the construction moratorium this year. Because of the fluidity of pricing, at this point there was no way to come up with an estimate for any of the bond projects. Therefore, Laflam stated the administration recommended indefinitely tabling the entire bond until either the State provided construction aid or the market was less volatile. Sander made a motion, seconded by Barry, to approve this recommendation. Stebbins stated it was disappointing to do so, but it would be very important to get State aid. This project could always be brought forward again. The motion to table the bond project passed unanimously.

Laflam then moved on to talking about the Central Office lease option. A second RFP went out in November of 2023. The bids were due in December and zero bids were received. The reasoning was that the original cost to build the space had doubled in 18 months. MSI asked for three more months to look at redesigning the space and decreasing the costs. A third RFP was issued on January 8th, with bid opening scheduled on March 7th. Laflam would return to the Board on March 11th to review the proposals and hoped the Board could make a decision at that time.

Meal Charge Policy 2nd Reading: Clark explained the policy changed to reflect that meals would be offered to all students at no charge. Second meals could be charged. Sander made a motion, seconded by Bezio, to approve the revised Meal Charge Policy. The motion passed unanimously.

Wellness Policy 2nd reading: The Board was informed that the biggest difference in the new policy was there were now goals for comprehensive health education that took into account curriculum, tobacco, alcohol, and abuse prevention education and defining a course of study. Webster made a motion, seconded by Hunsberger, to approve the revised Wellness Policy. The motion passed unanimously.

Board Member Conflict of Interest Policy 2nd reading: Gallagher emphasized the three items that Board members could make mistakes with. Gallagher reminded the members that responding to an issue on social media could appear as though it was a response from the Board. Stebbins made a motion, seconded by Bezio, to approve the revised Board Member Conflict of Interest Policy. The motion passed unanimously.

Administrative Updates: Gallagher reported that the AOE gave approval to use the two scheduled in-service days of February 2nd and March 15th as student days. In-service days will be put at the end of the school year. This would help to offset the school cancellations that had taken place so far this year. A second round of coffee and conversation would begin next week. They will be budget focused. Gallagher reported that her story time videos would begin again next week and the biggest group that reached out to her after viewing the videos were parents who stated they had never been read to as children. Gallagher then informed the Board that discussion was taking place that next year's school calendar could be a state-wide calendar.

Gallagher then stated that with elections coming up for Board seats, she felt it was important to outline some of the accomplishments of the Board. From 2021 to 2024 the Board agreed to establish community engagement events and community engagements. To this end, community dinners were now in place, with the last dinner seeing 103 individuals attend. Coffee and conversation gatherings empowered the Superintendent to interact with the community. That had been largely successful. As an example of providing opportunities for students, Gallagher noted that students in two schools, Cambridge and Hyde Park, were able to participate in a snowboard academy based on grants that Maria Davies was able to secure. There was more community engagement with Spruce Peak Community Arts. This Board had empowered the District to pass budgets and last year's budget passed by the greatest margin in over a decade.

This Board had empowered Gallagher to be an ambassador. That had allowed her to be nominated as the governing board member for the AASA, the ambassador to Washington, DC. This had also enabled her to serve as the President of the local regional group of Superintendents. It had enabled her to participate in the Route to Market business group as a panelist and a facilitator on mental health issues pre-K through Grade 12. The Board had also allowed Gallagher to serve as a member of local community groups.

Gallagher thanked the Board for having zero grievances in eight years and for accomplishing successful negotiations each time. She was grateful for administrator stability and continuity, as well as the Board's continuity. The school now had a robust mentor program that helped to retain and support new teachers. In the past, the District had never had teacher applications in January. As of this week they had several. In a partnership with Vermont State University, school clinicians had been placed at the high school and a five-year grant was in place to help schools with mental health issues.

In the area of instructional vision, the goal was to align the district's plan to emphasize high level instructional practices. The Board supported the purchase of a large system that allowed the District to implement a common local competence and assessment system. This was important because on the national level there were standardized tests that came and went. Any school district needed to have their own comprehensive assessment system so you could witness an individual student's progress over the years. The District had refined and redefined a coordinated curriculum with the Board's assistance.

Gallagher reported on the social and emotional wellbeing and safety goal. She noted that safety was not the absence of threat. It was the presence of connection. Physically, every single school had statewide approved safety plans. Gallagher and Manning were both trained in threat assessments and how to train others within the District. The Board allowed the District to hire two SRO's. These individuals have been very well received. Work continued with restorative practice. The student engagement scores were at 88%. The Restorative Center had engaged with 121 students district-wide.

Gallagher stated the Board had met and exceeded their goals. She thought the community needed to know what the Board had accomplished because there was a lot to be proud of. Gallagher thanked everyone for doing the hard work. She noted that new goals would be developed in March.

LNLU FY25 Budget Review/LNLUUSD FY25 Budget Review: Clark stated this would be the first review of the budget and a vote would not take place at this meeting.

The preliminary LNSU budget saw an increase of 62%. There was another \$129,000 from the prior year surplus that could be used to reduce that increase to 53.42%. The revenue changes included non-transportation billbacks increasing by over 120%. That increase was a result of paraeducators being moved to this budget. Interest income had increased. State Aid to Transportation was down 2.5% and the billback for transportation was up due to the lack of state aid.

The expense side notes of interest was that salaries would increase 20% and benefits would increase by almost 29%. This was due to a 16% increase that the regulatory board had just awarded to Blue Cross/Blue Shield as well as increased participation.

Transportation saw a modest increase of 7.16%. The reason was because they were overbudget from FY24. Special education was increasing 35%. Much of this was the change in revenue and the increase in expenses. The block grant had gone up about 4.5% and EEE had gone up almost 10%. The state placed values based on last year's actual receipts decreased by 60%. Salaries were up 17% and benefits had a modest increase of 5% due to a reduction in participants. With the difficulty in hiring and the loss of tuitioned service providers, the cost of professional services was increasing 47%.

In reviewing the non-special education costs at the Supervisory Union level, transportation was the largest expense at 39% of the total budget and personnel was 25% of the total budget. The special education budget personnel costs, including paraeducators, was 47% of the total budget and benefits costs were 20% of the budget.

The Supervisory Union's non-special education assessment allocation this year would be \$2,440,625. Last year's assessment was \$1,506,714. The special education assessment would be \$5,773,223. Last year's assessment was \$4,278,292.

Clark then discussed the MUUSD budget. She explained Act 127 to the Board members. The three main components of the Act that impacted the budget were as follows: there was a 10% increase limit on the per pupil spending which the State had changed from an equalized pupil count to a long term average daily membership count (LT ADM); if the budget exceeded the 10% increase, a Tax Review Board would review the budget; and if the budget was under 10%, the District would be provided a hold harmless benefit of capping the district tax rate increases to 5% as long as the LT ADM increases remained under 10% through the FY29 budget process.

With the change from equalized pupil spending to LT ADM, the numbers for LT ADM increased from 1018 to 1064 at the elementary level and from 1390 to 1561 at the secondary level. This one-time growth provided the district with a one-time opportunity to adjust budgets to allow for continued pandemic recovery work and to absorb economic pressures driving costs up.

The majority of the costs in the FY25 budget were in personnel. These positions served students directly and were vital. 67% of the elementary budget was going toward instruction services to the students. 76% of the costs at the secondary level was going toward instruction.

Currently, the MUUSD budget included \$275,000 in cuts. The secondary level also included \$200,000 in budget cuts. Small capital improvement projects were in the budget if there was any money available. After a review of student numbers determined by the State, today the District was able to add 41 students back to the calculation and the adjustment meant that it could be possible to remove some of the cuts.

With this recent change to the LT ADM numbers, the increase to the current budget at the elementary level was 8.9%. The increase to the secondary level budget was 7.9%. This would cap the budget at 5%. Because of this, there was an opportunity in this first year to put some of the secondary level capital projects back into the budget. The projects would include the kitchen floor, the bleachers, and exterior door placement.

If the Board put back \$50,000 in the elementary budget, the budget increase would be 9.2%. If the Board put \$200,000 back at the secondary level the increase would be 9.08%. This would generate a natural tax rate of 1.411%, which was a 5.84% increase of the District tax rate. However, because the budget increase would be under 10%, the tax rate would be capped at 5%. This amounted to a \$67 change per \$100,000 household.

Clark stated she had always shown the CLA and the town tax rate. With the fluctuation of the towns CLA and with property values increasing, Clark would not be showing town tax rates anymore.

Clark stated that by applying the additional \$129,000 of surplus to the Supervisory Union there could be another cut of \$45,000, bringing the per pupil spending down to 8.6% at the elementary level. At the secondary level it was a \$50,000 decrease bringing the spending down to 7.66%. If they added back \$200,000 at the secondary level in expenses the budget would remain under a growth rate of 9%. Clark asked if the Board was comfortable adding in \$50,000 at the elementary level and \$200,000 at the secondary level. This would still keep the budget under 10% so that one-time investments could be made.

Clark stated the Board would meet next Tuesday to discuss and decide the budget. Laflam said there were a lot of one-time projects that had not been addressed since 2020. Some of the projects were becoming more urgent every year. She strongly encouraged people to put some money back into the capital improvement budget.

Prescott asked about adding a capital reserve line item in the budget.

Clark asked that the Board consider how comfortable they were with getting close to the 10% limit and if they wanted to apply all of the reserve at the LNSU. She reminded the Board that there was \$149,000 sitting at the SU earmarked for other activities. Clark was asked to give four options for the Board to review at the next meeting. Prescott stated she was concerned about going over 9%.

Preliminary tuition numbers were \$29,000 at GMTCC, \$17,008 at the elementary schools and \$19,000 at the secondary level.

The Board then agreed to move the February Board meeting to February 19, 2024, the night of the Annual Meeting.

Personnel Matter: Nielsen stated this item would be moved to the next meeting.

Adjourn: Hayford made a motion and seconded to adjourn the meeting at 8:49 p.m.

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Statement from Meghan Luther, Forestry and Land Management Instructor:

I am here to talk about the proposed combination of the Forestry and Agriculture programs. As you can see with the numbers of people who have shown up or reached out that there is strong support for our programs. Past, present and future students, parents, industry professionals, supporters and other instructors have been surprised with this information and have shown up to show how much they value both agriculture and natural resources. Although both programs are under the agricultural umbrella they have been developed differently into natural resource and agriculture career paths with very different curriculum and career outcomes.

The forestry program is located in Hardwick where it is nestled right in their working forests lab. Students' maple sugarhouse and 2,000 tap sugarbush, along with a woodlot and trails they manage is right outside the campus doors. The farm, located in Jeffersonville, is located on fertile agricultural land, where there is pasture and open space to practice rotational grazing for their beef and goat herds, and

grow a variety of store quality vegetables. Both of these programs offer an education that the community and employers admire.

The proposal of combining these programs at the Hardwick campus I believe will offer a watered down glimpse of what these programs are. Neither of the campuses has the resources to run the needs of both programs. Right now we offer a wide variety of career outcome potentials that students and employers are looking for with both programs, and there is strong interest in the forestry program for next year and I do not know if a hybrid program would be attractive to them. Students in these programs do not tend to overlap in their interests. This is similar to trying to combine the construction, HVAC and electrical programs, because they do work within a house.

I do have some other ideas if you wish to hear them at a later time due to time constraints. But I ask that you allow the voters to decide and let our original budget without any cuts or combination of a program go to vote. There have not been issues passing budgets in the past due to our community's strong support of the variety of programs at Green Mountain Tech, especially if this means a loss of a natural resource or agriculture program.

Thank you for your time.

Statement from Sam Rowley, Sustainable Ag and Food Systems Instructor:

I'd like to focus on how unique our programs are and how they connect to the important working landscape that makes up the Vermont we cherish.

Both of our programs make local, quality, food or forest products that have and will continue to be an important part of the local economy.

Our facilities, equipment, animals, and access to land are the envy of other programs in the state. Very few if any other tech centers have the operation that we have in place for students to work and learn while immersed in the situation.

Our instructors are skilled, experienced, and passionate about our trade. I live this program every day and follow a goal to create a "model" farm and experience.

Our programs are woven into the community. It's farm tours, sugarhouse tours, Thanksgiving vegetable sale, wreaths and trees, food shelves, maple on snow and the cafeteria.

Our programs teach and model practices for a changing climate, severe weather events, and increased resiliency. The Vermont Department of Agriculture actually pays me a per acre amount because I implement soil-based agronomic practices that improve soil quality, increase crop production, and reduce erosion.

Farming and forestry is hard work. Students need to know what it's like to work in the cold and skin a knuckle now and then.

Lastly, we are training students for Vermont specific jobs. Vermont is a unique place regarding its soils and topography. We need our young people to live here, work here, and stay here. I'd rather see green pastures, cultivated fields, managed forests and sugaring than urban sprawl.

This statement from Andrew Casavant came in after the meeting:

Good Evening Chair Members of the LNSU/LNNUUSD Board.

My name is Andrew Casavant, 2010 alum from the GMTCC Automotive program. I was informed of the recent discussion to close or combine the forestry and agriculture programs within the GMTCC program.

Each program provides students with unique opportunities to learn and experience these trades. With each program there is equipment and resources required to provide the best learning experience. By combining the programs and moving them to a single site, the students will not get to experience the full scope of learning that can be provided, nor will the environment benefit the students. The ag program requires fertile land to sow, tend and harvest crops. Conversely, the forestry program requires wooded areas, sugarwoods and sap lines.

I understand there is a shortage of funding and enrollment this year was low, but maintaining these programs for future generations to learn is greatly beneficial. These trades are not going away anytime soon, and we need to educate students on proper and ethical ways to harvest and preserve our natural resources. Long term, if these programs were cut and then had to be revived in the future, it would take more time and resources to reinstate them then it would to keep them going.

I would encourage you to search every available avenue to keep these programs running. As a former student of the tech center, I was provided with the resources to apply for tech college, tuition assistance, and was taught the safe and ethical way to repair vehicles. I attribute these reasons as to why I have excelled in my career. I have classmates who are also gainfully employed who would echo these thoughts. Please search for any and all ways to keep these programs going.

Respectfully,
Andrew Casavant