

Panelists discuss merger plan, Act 46

Merger

BY JIM THERRIEN

jtherrien@benningtonbanner.com

MANCHESTER — Northshire voters shouldn't bank on revisions to Act 46 in deciding whether to support the merger of seven school districts into the proposed Taconic and Green Regional School District.

That was a major takeaway from a panel discussion at Burr and Burton Academy Monday on Act 46, which encourages Vermont school districts to consolidate, and the town meeting ballot question on formation of the new regional district.

State Rep. Cynthia Browning, D-Arlington, one of the six panelists, stressed that she has opposed Act 46 in myriad ways, offering or supporting a number of proposed changes to the 2015 law, all of which were defeated in the Legislature. Among those, she said, were efforts to make the law "more flexible," by encouraging rather than forcing district consolidations.

While there is some support in the Senate for Act 46 revisions, that is not the case in the House, Browning said, adding, "I don't think that anyone should base their vote on a proposed merger thinking this act will this change."

In addition, she and other panelists noted, there are tax incentives for those districts that merge under an Act 46 format, and continued access to Small Schools grants, which might not otherwise be available in the future.

"There is a lot of uncertainty," Browning said, no matter which way the nine towns involved vote on March 7.

It's a case, she said, of having to choose uncertainty over how a regional district will operate or over what will happen if the districts don't merge.

The state has included tax incentives but also "a hammer" in Act 46 to enforce consolidations if the incentives fail, Browning said. "You are going to have to get married; it is, do you get to choose who you are going to get married to, or not?"

And there is "no provision for divorce," she said.

While critical of aspects of Act 46, state Rep. Brian Keefe, R-Manchester, Rep. Linda Joy Sullivan, D-Dorset, and others on the panel praised the work of the 17-member Northshire Merger Study Committee, which developed the merger proposal last year and obtained State Board of Education approval for the plan.

Keefe said he is more concerned at this time about Board of Education-proposed new rules for private schools, which opponents fear could limit school choice options in the Northshire. The BOE recently delayed a vote on the final form of those changes, which aim to require private schools accepting public tuition funding to meet more of the regulations public schools must comply with, but Keefe said "this is something we need to watch closely."

While noting that two BOE members will leave soon, allowing Gov. Phil Scott to replace them, the panelists said it remains unclear whether changes to the proposed new rules could follow.

Commenting during a question and answer session that followed the panel discussion, Manchester resident Michael Powers said he is concerned that if the Taconic and Green merger is rejected by voters, “they [the state] will cram [a merger] down our throats,” and in the case of the Northshire, he said, “they will really cram it down our throats.”

Powers said such a reaction is likely, given the nearly 800 area residents and local officials who filled the BBA gymnasium in December for a hearing on the private school rule changes — almost all of the many speakers voicing strong opposition.

Panelist Brian Vogel, a former chairman of the Manchester school board, advocated voting against the merger. Terming Act 46 “bad

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Jon Wilson, chairman of the Northshire Merger Study Committee explains the Taconic and Green District merger proposal during a panel discussion on the merger and Act 46 Monday in Manchester.

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legislation,” Vogel said the merger committee “has done a fine job, but you can’t make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear.”

The ultimate goal of Act 46 “is to close small schools,” Vogel said, contending that although there is a four-year moratorium in the merger proposal against school closings, there could be pressure after that period on the new regional school board to close buildings.

He also termed the merger proposals under Act 46 “a one-way ticket,” in which there is no provision for a district or town to exit if the merger “turns out to be a disaster. If you vote to merge, if the merger passes,” he said, “it is done, and you lose local control.”

By becoming a merged district with a single school board, Taconic and Green also would have to become “less local” in its approach to policy and budgetary decisions affecting the nine towns involved, he said.

Vogel argued that under Act 46, also the Northshire also could wait another year before being forced by the state to merge, during which time the act might be revised or the political climate shift. And he contended it might be possible for a local district to successfully fight an order to merge in court.

Jon Wilson, the chairman of the merger study group, said the year-long effort by the group produced a 60-page report detailing the format of the proposed district, which he urged voters to familiarize themselves with. He said the plan represents a wellthought out response to Act 46 and will provide many benefits.

The larger kindergarten through 8th grade district would have about 1,700 students, Wilson said, and the ability to provide better funded and more varied educational opportunities throughout the regional district — as well as to continue to provide choice for high school age students to Burr and Burton, Long Trail School or other schools.

In addition, he said, having a single, larger school budget will help reduce the tax rate volatility a smaller district can face year-to-year, resulting in spikes in the rate, and can serve to break up the “silo” vision that can develop in smaller districts. He said the counter to the “local control” argument for school districts is that small districts have fewer options on their own, leading to less control over their educational programs.

He added that closing a school in the regional district would require a 75 percent vote of the school board.

Wilson also noted that the 17-member study group, with representatives from the nine towns, voted unanimously to approve the merger, as did the state Board of Education and principals in the existing five schools.

He acknowledged that many people might not like the “top-down” aspects of Act 46, but the group worked hard to develop the merger proposal, “and we took lemons and we really worked hard to make lemonade, and make something that was viable.”

Sullivan said that, from what she has learned at the Statehouse, the House Committee on Education “is still solidly behind” the provisions of Act 46, including forcing consolidation if merger incentives are not effective enough. That means, she said, that any support for revisions in the Senate are likely to be stalled in the House.

Sullivan said that leaves the Northshire in the position of possibly losing the incentives — including five years of reduced education taxes — “if we do nothing.”

She added, “Whether or not we believe in the wisdom of Act 46, it is a state law and can’t be ignored, and it is just not going to go away.”

Panelist Rob Roper, president of the conservative think tank, the Ethan Allen Institute, termed Act 46 “part of an overall plan by the education bureaucracy to gather more power onto itself.”

He said proposed changes in rules governing private schools in Vermont and new regulation regarding child care programs also are “part of the overall picture.”

Roper said he favors “more choice” throughout the state, arguing that choice of schools would result in more efficiency in budgeting and greater flexibility in developing education programs. Noting that the Northshire is one of the areas of Vermont with the most choice among public and private schools, he said, “You guys are going it right.”

If voters disagree with the state’s education policies, Roper and Browning urged them to write legislators or the governor, write letters to editor and take similar actions to make themselves heard.

“And tell your stories on social media,” Roper said.

He added, “It would be interesting to see if any school committees call the state’s bluff” and file suit after being ordered to merge with other districts.

The panel discussion was moderated by Andrew McKeever, of GNAT-TV, which recorded the presentation.

Wilson said another informational session on the merger plan is set for Thursday at 6:30 p.m. at Manchester Community Library.

Jim Therrien writes for the Bennington Banner and VTDigger.org. @BB_therrien on Twitter.