

Town of Hawley, Massachusetts
Minutes of a
Selectboard / Board of Health / Zoning Board of Appeals Meeting
March 3, 2025

Present: Will Cosby, Hussain Hamdan, Robert MacLean – Selectboard
Tinky Weisblat, Gal Friday; Sarah Reynolds, Charlemont Town Administrator
Valentine Reid and Kim Blakeslee – Charlemont Selectboard
Sheryl Stanton, School Superintendent
Ken Bertsch and Martha Thurber – School Committee Members
Peter Beck, Charlie MacLean, and Dena Wilmore

The meeting was called to order at 7 p.m. Sheryl Stanton explained that this was one of several presentations she and school-committee members were planning to give to area Selectboards and finance committees about the possibilities identified by the School Sustainability Study. She thanked those present for hearing what was to come and said she and her colleagues would be happy to take questions. She then handed the floor to Ken Bertsch of the Hawlemont School Committee.

Ken (and eventually Martha and Sheryl) walked the group through the report (included here). The basic choices, all of which had varying financial and mental costs and rewards, were:

1. No change to current governance model or number of schools. Although the group believed it could save about \$400,000 by instituting some efficiencies in the school systems, members believed in the long run the districts (and therefore the towns) would face major financial difficulties. They noted a number of challenges: declining enrollment, rising operational costs, relatively flat state aid, and increasing needs among students.
2. The second option would merge the Mohawk Trail and Hawlemont School Districts. This would have minimal impact as the two districts already shared many resources.
3. The third model would move all Sixth Grade classes to the Mohawk Trail campus. This would provide modest cost savings and might work as an intermediate step to more radical change.
4. The fourth model would involve consolidating the elementary schools to one or two campuses. This entailed savings but also presented challenges. In terms of maximizing population density, Buckland-Shelburne Elementary School in Shelburne Falls would make sense, but expanding its use would present traffic, space, and parking problems.
5. Model five would entail consolidation to one district on one campus, that of Mohawk Trail Regional School. It would provide the largest cost savings but would require renovating and expanding the school there. The group was optimistic that the state, through the Massachusetts School Building Authority, could provide major assistance with costs, however, resulting in overall savings over time to the towns.

As the school officials made their presentation, a number of questions and points arose. Val Reid of Charlemont thought it might be helpful to include capital expenditures in the figures in the presentation, which covered only operational expenses.

Val and others pointed out that although the second model, consolidating the two districts into one, would result in lower assessments for Charlemont and Hawley (due to smaller enrollment), it would cause higher assessments for more populous towns and therefore might meet resistance.

Hussain noted that a few years back Buckland-Shelburne had needed quite a bit of work, particularly in terms of asbestos removal. Martha said that some of the work had been done, but it was still an old building. She noted that if the district wanted to increase the value of the building more than 30 percent, it was obliged by law to bring everything in the building up to code, which might prove an expensive proposition. (Ken noted that many districts chose new construction over renovation for this reason.) Sheryl suggested that if the towns decided to consolidate elementary education in one school, it might make sense to work with the Massachusetts School Building Authority to do a feasibility study to see which elementary school or schools would be best to keep.

Charlie MacLean asked whether the other towns in the Mohawk Trail district were experiencing the kind of drop in numbers Hawley and Charlemont had. Sheryl said that all the towns had some decrease in numbers but that our two towns were dropping faster. She noted that school choice had contributed to the low numbers at Hawlemont School.

Charlie asked about reductions in staffing. Martha and Sheryl stressed that those would be done through attrition rather than layoffs. Hussain stated that it would be important to communicate this fact to the public.

The group discussed the fact that the MSBA would only fund based on current school populations; expected enrollment made no difference. Hussain observed that the population could go back up in future years, and new construction should have sufficient capacity to address this. He hoped the administration could push back on this point.

Kim noted that if condition rather than location were used as the main criterion, Hawlemont and Sanderson would be the best elementary schools to keep as they were in the best shape. She suggested that using those schools could at least serve as a transitional step.

Sheryl explained that if new buildings were used instead of old ones, more efficient use of space might be achievable; she said that rooms in the current buildings had been repurposed for special uses. She stressed the importance of compromise in decision making.

Hussain noted the importance of voters' ability to see the end point of the plan and to know that it could be reached. Martha said she hoped that changes could involve as few separate votes as possible (and expressed the hope that most of the project could be addressed in two town meeting votes).

Ken explained that the bus situation was complicated. One idea would be to have only one bus run and to use vans for the most remote students. It appeared that drivers of small vans had no need for commercial driver's licenses.

Martha said that the group hoped to file a statement of intent to build with the MSBA in the spring to get the district into the queue there. That statement of intent did not commit the district to pursuing building. Sheryl suggested that it might be helpful for officials and the public to visit recent school-building projects elsewhere in the state. Hussain opined that perhaps a video could be made for those who could not travel.

Martha explained that the group hoped to hire someone in the summer to work on a regional agreement. The earliest vote on such an agreement would be in the fall of 2026.

Hussain offered thanks to the school officials, citing a building knowledge of declining enrollments and spiraling costs.

Martha stressed that the district, along with others, was lobbying for better aid to rural schools. Val noted that Chapter 70 funds had been a problem for some time and wondered aloud whether it wasn't time to do something beyond lobbying. He suggested that district towns devise a warrant article for Annual Town Meeting suggesting funding an exploration of suing the state. Hussain was skeptical. Sheryl said that she thought the funding discriminated by geographic location. Will noted that the attorneys who had originally fought for Chapter 70 were of retirement age; the group would have to find new lawyers. He asked Tinky to put possible funding on Hawley's next Selectboard agenda.

Hussain suggested that since Chapter 70 funds went to the school district, the school committees should vote on a resolution before the Towns started talking about lawsuits.

Will identified two bills that had not made it out of committee in the current legislative session that might be useful in the future.

Tinky stressed the importance of community and stakeholder engagement in any new school plan. Sheryl said that Hawlemont's HAY and 4-H programs could be shared with other towns. Other schools also had valuable programs that could benefit a larger group if the districts merged.

Val asked whether living locally could be made a requirement for school staff. Sheryl explained that that might prove difficult but making it a preference would work.

Tinky asked about non-parent adult involvement in the schools. Sheryl cited the new senior exercise program at the high school and suggested that other possibilities, including housing a regional senior center and ambulance service, could be explored.

Ken noted that deciding what to do with old school buildings might present a challenge for towns. Val suggested that individual towns be asked for their plans.

The group returned briefly to the question of busing, noting that regional transit authorities were not allowed to take students to school.

Hussain observed that a lot of information had been presented. He asked what the school officials wanted from the Selectboards going forward. For the moment, Martha said, they wanted feedback, questions, and comments. She said that questionnaires were being circulated at the public meetings and suggested that the boards receive those as well.

Other funding paths were briefly discussed, including the millionaires' tax, the superintendent's discretionary fund, and foundations. Martha noted that some members of the Berk12 group were contracted to stay through April. School officials were hoping to find some extra funding to keep them going a bit longer.

There being no other business, the meeting was adjourned at 8:20 p.m.

Respectfully submitted, Tinky Weisblat, Gal Friday

Williams Cosby

Hussain Hamdan

Robert MacLean