

**SELECTBOARD MEETING & PUBLIC FORUM
SEPTEMBER 11 2025
Draft Minutes**

Present: Pat Haller
Julia Andrews
Deb Jorschick
Casey Mathieu
Nick Nichols

Greg Barrows
Tommy O'Conner
Callie Hamdy

Guests: see attached.

The meeting was called to order at 6:15 p.m. The meeting was held in person and via Zoom.

CHANGES TO THE AGENDA

There were no changes to the agenda.

PUBLIC COMMENT

There was no public comment.

DRB DECISION SIGN OFF

Harmony Cism, Zoning Administrator & Planning Coordinator, was present. The Westford Conservation Commission (WCC) wanted to reroute a trail around a water resource and needed DRB permission to do so. As part of the final DRB decision, Harmony needed to send a decision letter to the landowner, which is Westford. **P. Haller** motioned to approve, **D. Jorschick** seconded. Motion passed 5-0.

ACCESS PERMITS

Brown

Sean had already approved this and noted that they need to upgrade the culvert, which will be done by the town. **P. Haller** Motioned to approve. **J. Andrews** seconded. Motion passed 5-0.

Girr

Sean had no problems with this. **J. Andrews** motioned to approve, **D. Jorschick** seconded. Motion passed 5-0.

PADEN SUBDIVISION ACCESS

H. Cism, explained that the landowners are having to do a subdivision and the access is also used to access a neighbor's property, there is a ROW through the Paden property. There was a court case that granted the access through the Paden property. They talked about it as a class 4 road the town does not maintain, but the town had never classified it as this. The Selectboard needs to decide if they want it to be a Class 4 Road or a Private. **P. Haller** motioned to keep the road as a Class 4 road as decided by the Vermont Supreme Court. **J. Andrews** seconded. Motion passed 5-0.

Both landowners had agreed on the name Hemlock Ridge Road and were looking for Selectboard approval of that name. **P. Haller** motioned to recognize the existence of the Class 4 road, to approve the name of Hemlock Ridge Road and direct the administrative office to add Hemlock Ridge Road to the official highway map. **D. Jorschick** seconded. Motion passed.

REVIEW GY'25 GENERAL FUND BUDGET STATUS REPORT

G. Barrows, Treasurer, went over the FY' 25 General Fund Budget Status Report.

REVIEW AND APPROVE ACCOUNTS AND PAYROLL WARRANTS

G. Barrows, Treasurer, reviewed the Accounts and Payroll Warrants with the Selectboard. The Selectboard approved the warrants and signed off on them.

ROAD SCHEDULE

S. Cushing, Road Foreman, was not present. **C. Mathieu** went over the Road Schedule from August 29, 2025 to September 11, 2025.

FY'25 HIGHWAY BUDGET STATUS REPORT

G. Barrows, Treasurer, was present and went over the FY'25 Budget Status Report.

MINUTES

P. Haller motioned to accept the August 14, 2025 minutes as amended. **J. Andrews** seconded. Motion passed 5-0.

P. Haller motioned to accept the August 28, 2025 minutes as amended. **J. Andrews** seconded. Motion passed 5-0.

CORRESPONDENCE

Correspondence in regard to Veterans Banners and safety of installation.

D. Jorschick wondered if we had heard anything regarding the Covered Bridge project? **T. O'Conner** confirmed we have reached out four different times and have not received communication back. **C. Mathieu** wanted to talk with the Town Attorney before further communication with the contractor.

COMMUNICATION

There were requests to communicate and announce Tommy in the position of Town Administrator.

Adjourned: 6:52 p.m.

PUBLIC FORUM ON SCHOOL ACT 73

Introduction/Call to Order

P. Haller opened up the meeting at 7:00pm. He explained the purpose of the meeting, which is to educate people on Act 73. They will also discuss whether Westford has any recommendations to make to the redistricting committee. **Lee McClenny**, Town Moderator, began the meeting.

Overview of Act 73

Margaret MacLean, Rural Community Schools Alliance (RCSA)

Margaret MacLean from the RCSA was present. The RCSA is a grassroots group of over 100 towns that represent rural schools who have concerns over how they will be structured and function in larger districts. Westford is a member. How Act 73 might impact Westford is different from how it might impact other towns. Westford is currently merged with Essex Town and the City of Essex Junction into the Essex Westford School District (EWSD). The new system will be larger districts than exist now. Districts will be 4,000 – 8,000 students. Because our area is more densely populated than other parts of the states it is anticipated the larger districts will be in our area. One of the things that has become apparent in some current

districts is that when there are discrepancies in size it can be hard to come together as one voice. Essex Town and the City of Essex Junction are considerably larger and have the weight of the decision making, this impacts Westford in a certain way. One of the things we have to think about and perhaps advocate for is perhaps putting Westford with towns of similar size rather than with towns that are all very much larger such as Essex. Margaret thinks that if Westford were working with towns of similar size our voice would be more equal. The task force may or may not take into account what the town recommends, but if we do not tell them they will not know that we have preferences. We could also choose to stay together with our current school district, the law is seeking to make the least amount of disruption for school children as possible, but that would mean we would be in a massive school district with even less power than we have now. RSCA understands that the task force knows that if they hope the redistricting is successful, they should take the town's input. It will be voted on in January.

Act 72 and the Essex Westford School District

Marlon Verasemy, EWSD School Board Vice Chair

Marlon Verasemy, EWSD School Board Vice Chair, was present. As a school board they have also been advocating for the district as a whole with the task force. The task force has no authority to make decisions in what the districts look like. They have the power to create three maps that the legislature will then vote on. They did want schools and towns to give feedback. He explained that the school districts own the buildings and employ the staff at the school, organize after school activities etc. The legislation does not address how to unmarry a school from a school district in this situation. There are a lot of moving parts and understanding that these things will impact students.

Public Discussion

Carol Winfield asked if the county lines are going to be a consideration in Act 73 redistricting? Could Westford be grouped with Fairfax or would it have to be schools in Chittenden County?

M. MacLean noted the task force has created a rubric and are weighing options against the rubric. One option would be county-sized districts; another would be to organize around CTE centers. Each gets tested against the rubric, but they are not making any conclusions at this point.

M. Verasemy explained that we know that not all counties are the same, Chittenden County has more students in it than the district target number and three CTE's so Chittenden County alone would need multiple districts.

Martha Heath noted one of Westford's major concerns is whether our school will stay open. The legislation has some class size descriptions; she is curious as to what those numbers are and how our current class sizes stack up against those.

M. MacLean replied that they do have in the law class size minimums, and she imagines that Westford meets the minimums the way they are now. They start at different numbers for lower elementary and go up as the grades progress. One thing the legislation articulates clearly is: local elementary schools, central middle schools, and regional high schools. When we think about that it plays out differently in all consequences. A lot of current schools do not fit that mold. She believes our elementary school would be at Westford School, but the only thing with the possibility to be different would be when "middle school" starts and where that is located.

M. Verasemy confirmed Westford will meet the minimum class requirements. With that being said, from EWSD's thinking the current middle school consolidation has protected the district system in the long term. EWSD does not consider the class size minimum's a concern.

N. Nichols appreciated Margaret's comments about being with equal size towns, can she talk about the potential changes at the school if we were to do that? Would we lose our ability to send students to Essex High School?

M. Verasemy explained that they could go to Essex High School but would have to go through a limited lottery to do so. Otherwise, you would have to go to the school in your region.

M. MacLean explained the assumption is the district will stay together as that is the least disruptive for students, but as we move into a bigger unit, if we were to work with similar towns that would be a different arrangement than if we were working with Essex. So, who we partner with to get to the larger number would impact the kind of grouping we would be a part of and if we would be one of a number of towns that are similar size or if we would be a small town with two other big towns. All that affects our voice and contribution to the district. In the new districts, voting will be done by ward, it will not be by town. School Board members will not be elected by a town; they will be elected based on population groups so Westford may not have a school board member. Also, when we go to the larger district we do not yet know how many members will be on that school board. Nor do we know exactly who will be grouped with or how the wards will be set up. Also, when we look at the state it is required that the legislature be given at least one map, up to three maps, and one map will have supervisory unions in it. Supervisory unions are how rural districts mostly operate. Many supervisory unions exist around Vermont because they allow for that freedom and unity for the towns. Supervisory Unions will have the boards that exist now, there may be incentives to merge some of the boards, but they will have existing School Boards moving into those larger supervisory unions.

Clayton Wilburn asked, based on the current benefits for the merger we have with Essex on a per student or per capita basis do we know what benefits the districts provide and whether that is above or below the average we can expect? If we were to divide, would we be expecting a similar possibility of support for what this includes, or would we be more likely to make a sacrifice in this area?

M. Verasemy explained that we do not know yet because it depends on where we go. He fully believes EWSD has some of the highest benefits of the districts. Regarding Special Education, EWSD is concerned that funding will be cut at the federal level. EWSD has created Special Education services in house that only them and South Burlington have done.

Elisa Melville asked If we joined with a smaller school group what is the transportation going to look like and how will that affect our students? If we requested to go with Fairfax/Georgia/ Fletcher will our transportation that everybody go to Fairfax or would they have options for schools? If we went to Essex and they added Colchester into that, would we have choices between those two schools? Her biggest concern is special education, how are we making sure the kids are being taken care of with the transition?

M. Verasemy explained that bussing has been an issue since Covid and it does suck, they are still looking for more ideas to bring more people onboard. Even with a larger district that problem will likely prevail. If anybody feels their students' needs are not met, they should meet with the school itself, he wished he could provide a clear answer, but we do not have an

answer on these questions yet and cannot get involved until things are voted on. He cannot speak regarding where kids will go since that will depend on what that new larger district decides. It will be an entirely different board so he cannot speak to what decision they will make.

M. MacLean commented that Vermont is a rural state, which is why the community school is important. When we look at other states that have consolidated schools and bus students, we do see students on buses for more than 2 hours a day. Bussing is something to pay attention to.

Sheila Franz asked regarding the High School. She is all about excellence in education and Essex High School is a gem in her opinion. She is not saying other schools are not good, but her son was able to take enough AP classes to go to one of the best engineering schools in the country to get a Bachelors and Masters in four years. She does not want to see our community lose our ability to access EHS. Is Essex still that high quality that it was?

M. Verasemy replied yes, in state scores EWSD scores above state average by 25 points. EWSD did not lag behind post Covid-19. He explained there was a question regarding high school choice when a new district has multiple high schools. The answer right now is we do not know because we do not have any districts to know if they will have multiple high schools. Most districts have a single high school so this will be uncharted territory. It will likely be up to the new board.

M. MacLean explained that in rural Vermont school districts operate differently where they provide choice for some grades. It is usually due to the history of the region. With school choice the parents are up to provide transportation, and the schools are not necessarily closed by.

Kirsten Tyler asked about the foundational formula. Could either speak to the amount per person and where that money will go and who will be making decisions on what the money will be spent ? Is that a school, ward, or district decision?

M. MacLean explained that the good thing about Act 73 is implementation is happening over a long period of time, it will not happen all at once. First, they will vote on redistricting in January. If the maps and plans are not acceptable to the legislature, that is it, it stops and does not get implemented further. If the plans pass and move forward then the focus will move away from redistricting to the finance aspects of the law. In 2027-28 there will be another vote implementing another change in the finance system. Currently we have an equalized funding system and when that was first instituted, the spending between districts was narrow, it was not a fixed amount per person. Over the last 20 years it has gotten further apart so we are all paying for all Vermont's children, but some districts are spending a lot more than other districts. The foundation formula would narrow that gap to the point where there is a per student cost. It will constrain spending at the high end, but it is a long way off before we have to get to that point.

Sara Yeager's understanding is that we have a rubric that is being assessed, and we have our community members who have an opportunity to express wants and desires. At a certain point something will be presented for a vote. Can somebody speak to the rubric being used by the redistricting task force?

M. MacLean explained that the task force has these meetings publicly. They are developing the rubric and have a draft of it currently. Each plan will be weighed against it to see what is the most promising. When they are doing this there is the ideal and there is the real world on the ground. Sometimes the ideal and the real world do not jive. That is one reason why she thinks it is important for the community to think about this. If they have something they wish to communicate they should communicate it, but they are not required to.

M. Verasemy explained a couple data points they are looking at are buildings, geographical barriers, demographics. The task force does not yet have the data from the Agency of Education (AOE) that they need due to understaffing at the AOE.

Wendy Doane asked about the governance and representation. She wants to know that we would have better representation if we went with one of the other models. Right now, she does not feel we are represented. She had a child that attended EHS and a child that attended MMU and they are equally good schools, although MMU's demographics were closer to Westford.

M. Verasemy explained as things stand, the district representation is based on state law. He acknowledged the issue with Westford's representation and how it can minimize voices from smaller communities. The disproportionate representation issues are also present at MMU. **W. Doane** wanted more data on student performance, on number of hours of student travel, it seems like we are making decisions without good information and feels Westford got into this situation because the board did not ask those questions 10 + years ago.

M. MacLean explained in mergers where there are disparities of size those mergers tend to be problematic. Westford merged early, in good faith, and early in the timeline. Over time we found things out about the merger and how it worked in practice, how hard it is to be the smaller community when the partners have much larger decision-making weight. Mergers that came later paid particular attention to the articles of agreement as a way to level that disparity. The agreements level off the imbalance that is created by size and give a greater sense of security so we can collaborate successfully. We can revisit our articles and look at other articles around the state that would be more appropriate for our situation. She heard from a district that had been forced into merger and after they did so they sat down and produced articles that made each member town operate as equals despite population. They are currently operating successfully. At this point changing articles does not make sense because everybody will redistrict. Our question becomes how we can be part of a larger district and still maintain our voice as a community.

Elias Rosenblatt noted that regarding hypothetical combinations with other schools and districts some districts will have to be broken apart. Are school boards talking with each other? Are those conversations happening and is that a valuable place for community members to come share their input?

M. MacLean explained that these conversations are happening around the state. The law is wanting the least disruption to children possible, so the assumption is that we will stay together with Essex/City of Essex Junction, but some schools are already seeing where that is not necessarily possible; they are not in a community that has a single high school, they all operate separately and provide school choice so there is not the same cohesion that we have with Essex.

M. Verasemy noted that most of the school boards in Chittenden County were against Act 73.

There have not yet been conversations on who wants to pair up, but he anticipates that will happen. Currently it is more how can we advocate for what we want for our students as a group. How is this really going to bring better outcomes for students? That is a question he is yet to hear from anybody in Montpelier. Chittenden County has the most diverse district in the state, including English language learners.

S. Yeager asked why rush the process? It seems very important, and the timelines seem unfairly short.

M. Verasemy thought that was a great question. The timeline comes from Governor Scott and the legislation. He believes if you asked the legislature about that they would also like more time. He thinks that is a good question to bring to the Governor. He feels the timelines are crazy. Cost is only one concern, if we are going to reinvent this, we need to do it right, so we do not affect our students. Other states that have done this have done this over the course of 10 years.

M. MacLean explained this is a bill that passed in a bipartisan way. The RSCA agreed to work through the process to bring research and information from communities to the table to help make it happen in an effective way. They agree the timeline is very short, it has begun and seems to be doing it in good faith. They do not have to provide three maps; they have to provide at least one map, and one map must have supervisory unions.

L. McClenny opened the floor for statements from those attending the meeting. Speakers were Brenda Steady, Elizabeth Melville, Clayton Wilburn, Jemima Talbot, Martha Heath (proposed a merger between EWSD and MMU), Andrew Katz (noted MMU was the number 1 ranked high school in the state), Kirsten Tyler (elaborating about middle school consolation, asked for articles of agreement to be changed but EWSD said no), Chris Mattos.

Selectboard Next Steps

The Selectboard deliberated on their next steps. **P. Haller** appreciated Martha's recommendation of a EWSD/MMU merger. **Stacia McIntosh** mentioned that there is a portion of Westford that basically lives in Underhill. The merger with EWSD/MMU would make her happy, it has been a struggle to get her son to Westford elementary school. He would be on the bus for an hour just for that. She had no idea this would be his potential future. **K. Tyler** suggested that there be another session to address different configurations people want to suggest. **C. Winfield** did not think we have heard enough to have the board or those present to make a decision. We have personal opinions and those should be expressed to the board and the task force, but keep in mind that the current model we have has recently proven that we as a town of 2,000 have no voice in our children's future when paired with a town of 20,000. **Brenda Steady** suggested forming a committee to get through this. **S. Yeager** was for a EWSD/MMU merger. She thinks her thought is that we know the quality and to the notion of voting for the known or unknown, we know what we are getting and hear we can get better representation.

ADJOURN

The meeting adjourned at 8:53p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,
Casey Mathieu, Selectboard Chair
Callie Hamdy, Minute Clerk

GUEST LIST

Carol Winfield
Rachel Girr
Dave Gauthier
Harmony Cism
Ben Bornstein
Kim Guidry
Ira Allen
Sue Roediger
Maura O'Brien
Will Paden
Dave Lavalie
Dick Lavallee
Sheila Franz
Vicky Ross
Michelle Brennen
Ann Sharp
Brenda Steady
Peter Girr

Lee McClenny
Elias Rosenblatt
Sara Yeager
Jemima Talbot
Chris Mattos
Andrew Katz
Margaret MacLean
Marlon Verasemy
Stephanie Calderwood
Vanessa Hamlin
Rachel Girr
Alicia Dragon
Bayley Greer
Devin Porter
Kathleen Porter
Kati Anderson
Becca Davanon
Sarah Roberts

Susan Schmidt
Thomas Orfeo
Martha Heath
Wendy Doane
Kirsten Tyler
Mark Drapa
Stacia McIntosh
Heather Armata
Jodi Mashia
Elizabeth Melville
Dan Embrola