Readsboro School District

Special "Town Hall" Meeting Minutes

Tuesday, January 13, 2026

6:00 PM

<u>Location:</u> Readsboro School Gym & Remote

Present: *Cindy Florence, Helyn Strom-Henriksen, James Irace, Bill Bazyk, Beth Toth, Robyn Oyer, Garon Turcotte-Smail, Stacy Bolte, Lindsay Bleau, Asa Whitcomb Joces, Jaymes Jones II, Sirean LaFlamme, Carol Marks, Cheryl Green, Joe Berard, Caitlyn Boyd, Ryan Diy, Natashe Berard, Alex Filiault, Lance Howard, Emily Howard, Becky Richardson, Jesse Lane, Collen and PJ Sausville, David Marchegiani, Tyler Malloy, Jesse Leonas, Kayla Marchegiania, Debra Pavin, Larry Pladdys, Cassie Galusha, Dylan Howes, Rhonda Smith, Omar Smith, Bruce Busa, Danielle Mixon, Jody Berard, Meghan Deblois, Jonathan Deblois, Wayne B Righi, Aaron Beer, Kristina Beer*

I. Call to Order

Cindy called the meeting to order at 6:02 PM

II. Changes to the Agenda

None

III. Items for Discussion with Possible Action

- **Act 73**
  - Readsboro Special Town Hall Meeting Informational Documents
  - Preliminary Budgets
    - FY/27 Operating – Provided in the meeting folder
    - FY/27 Non-operating – Provided in the meeting folder

Cindy opened the meeting and asked:

Why are we here?

To see how a small rural school like Readsboro fits into Act 73.

The landscape around education in Vermont is changing rapidly. Rising costs continue to challenge budgets. Act 73 has brought additional statewide conversations about school sustainability. Many school Districts in Vermont have been exploring options such as: non-operating tuition school districts; and consolidation/mergers. Some are doing nothing and allowing the future of the District to be in the hands of lawmakers.

We have always been transparent in sharing information. We provided updates through meeting minutes and also circulated documents ahead of this meeting. Hopefully, you had time to review them.

Helyn continued:

The purpose of this meeting tonight is to openly discuss options for the future of Readsboro School together and understand the potential impacts.

Statewide education costs are expected to rise by double digits this year. Increasing costs due to healthcare, salaries, and special education are becoming very expensive, and lawmakers are working to transform the system through Act 73.

Superintendent Bill Bazyk provided the most recent updates about Act 73.

There are significant amounts of activity statewide, specifically in our region:

1. Jamaica Village School and Windham School closed on June 30, 2025.
2. Marlboro School will be voting on becoming non-operational this year.
3. Wardsboro School and Dover School are currently planning a merger into Dover School over the next two years.
4. A study is underway to close Townsend School and send students to Newbrook School in Newfane.
5. Currier School in Danby, VT. and the Sunderland School are scheduled to close on June 30, 2026.
6. There will be a vote to close Dorset School effective June 30, 2027.

Helyn continued:

Right now, we have a choice. If we wait, we may not have one. That is why other schools in our region are being proactive.

Jim stated:

Even if Act 73 does not end up happening, it is still "a good time for us to take a look and see what might make the most sense." He explained that the district looked at school enrollment, which has continued to decline, more homeschooling, the skyrocketing costs that have already been mentioned, the increased needs for special education, and lower than anticipated student performance. He stated that "when you take all of these together, it starts the thought that maybe now is the time to take a look at some of our other options."

He explained that while small schools can be very beneficial, Readsboro is now considered a "micro sized school," and there is not really any information out there that can support whether a micro sized school is the best thing for kids. He stated that as numbers continue to decline, even if educational opportunities are still there, a lot of the social opportunities that go along with educational experiences aren't.

The entire school currently has 37 students PreK through sixth grade, stating "it's become very, very tiny." He explained that this is one of the reasons that even without Act 73, now may be a time to take this into consideration. He emphasized that the goal is to consider whether the district has reached a point where class size and configuration begin to limit learning opportunities, and whether larger, stronger class configurations could better support student outcomes.

The current enrollment in Readsboro is very small:

Grade Level	#		Grade Level	#
Pre-K / Kindergarten	9		1st / 2nd Grades	10
3rd / 4th Grades	7		5th / 6th Grades	11

Garon Turcotte-Smail, the Director of Curriculum, shared a PowerPoint presentation online for visibility and conducted a presentation. Garon stated that he is a Vermonter and that he "gets small schools." He said he understands what people like about them, why they are cherished, and that they are part of who we are. He explained that his role was not to make a decision, but to share information to help the community figure out how to think about whether a school becomes too small and to provide broad things to consider when making a big decision.

He described a small class as generally falling in the range of 10 to 20 students, noting benefits such as individualized attention without isolating students, high engagement, participation and collaboration, strong relationships between teachers and students, positive classroom environments, opportunities for teamwork and leadership, and improved behavior or academic outcomes.

He explained that when classes become too small, schools begin to struggle to achieve those benefits. He stated that questions arise about whether there are too few kids to have the interactions you want, whether there are enough students for collaboration, and whether one student being absent can throw off the whole classroom for the whole day. He noted that very small schools can also struggle to sustain enrichment activities.

The Director emphasized that "it's not that bigger is always better," but that there is a balancing point. He explained that Readsboro may be at a "tipping point" where micro classes begin to outweigh the benefits of small classes. He stated that this determination is not about putting a finger on a number, but about judging the experience and understanding whether classrooms are still able to deliver the benefits typically associated with small schools. Garon invited anyone with questions to reach out to him directly: gturcotte-smail@wswsu49.org

Bill Bazyk added:

As part of Act 73, the state board of education has been tasked with identifying what qualifies as "small by necessity," and in doing so has established minimum standards for class size. He stated that those standards include 10 students at the first-grade level and 12 students across grades two through five, and emphasized that these are minimum thresholds, not targets. He noted that based on current enrollment, Readsboro is not meeting those standards.

He further explained that while the state allows for hardship exceptions, those exceptions are intended for circumstances where geography creates significant barriers, such as remote locations or excessive travel times. He stated that because schools within the supervisory union are within 45 minutes, and Stamford and Twin Valley are significantly closer, Readsboro would not be considered a hardship case under the current framework.

He concluded by reiterating that the purpose of sharing this information was not to advocate for a specific outcome, but to help the community "mull over" whether the school has reached a point where micro class sizes begin to limit the experience, and to consider whether the current size of the school supports the educational opportunities, interactions, and outcomes the district wants for its students.

Cindy reviewed the Board proposal with the town as follows:

The Board is proposing an Australian ballot vote on March 3 to determine whether Readsboro should become a non-operating tuition district.

Why is the Board recommending that this question be placed on the ballot?
Aside from everything presented tonight, there is also a potential time constraint. Depending on outcomes of Act 73, the State may no longer recognize non-operating school districts after July 1, 2026. Placing the question on the ballot allows the community to consider an option that preserves school choice while long-term solutions are evaluated and acted on.

What would the ballot article look like?
The proposed article would read as follows:

Shall the voters of the Readsboro School District authorize the School Board to close the Readsboro Central School and provide for the elementary education of the students by paying tuition in accordance with law to one or more public elementary schools in one or more school districts, effective July 1, 2026?

There would be a second article for voter approval of the associated budget.

- **Option 1:**
  A "Yes" vote
  This means that Readsboro would become a non-operating tuition District (effective July 1, 2026) and the school would close. Students would have school choice for all grades.

- **Option 2:**
  A "No" vote
  This means you want to keep the school open and continue operations as it currently does for the foreseeable future.

Following discussion of the vote and the non-operating option, **Jim explained:**
Mergers would be a longer-term option and would not take effect in time for the upcoming school year. He stated that regardless of whether the district becomes non-operating or remains operating, the option to pursue a merger would still be available, but emphasized that any merger would require another town vote and agreement from both districts.

Jim Irace explained that there are two potential districts that could be considered: Stamford and Twin Valley, and that there are key differences between those models. He stated that when a district merges, the entire district must follow the same operating model.

He explained that Stamford is currently a K–8 district. If Readsboro were to merge with Stamford under its current structure, students currently attending middle school elsewhere would be required to return. He noted that there is a possibility for Stamford to move to a K–6 model, similar to Readsboro's current structure, which could preserve middle school choice, but that this would require alignment and agreement between both communities.

Jim further explained that Twin Valley is a K–12 district, and that merging with Twin Valley would require adopting that K–12 model, meaning middle and high school students would lose school choice and attend Twin Valley schools.

He emphasized that these discussions are in the very early stages, that only high-level differences have been identified, and that pros and cons would need to be explored over time. He reiterated that no merger could occur without voter approval, and that the community would be involved throughout the process.

He also noted that mergers represent the largest potential financial savings, but stressed that both towns must agree, and that a merger cannot be decided unilaterally.

Helyn continued:

Transportation would remain the same whether the school remains operating or becomes non-operating. She explained that there would continue to be a bus to Twin Valley and a bus to North Adams for all students, and that transportation would not change based on the outcome of the vote.

Cindy opened the floor for public questions. She explained that if any questions could not be answered in the moment, the Superintendent would record them, and the Board and Superintendent would take a short recess to review the questions together. She stated that the meeting would then resume after recess to provide responses and emphasized the Board's commitment to accuracy in answering questions.

Public Statements, Comments, Questions and Responses

- Becky Richardson, a teacher with 23 years of service, stated they felt "completely blindsided by this time frame" and requested the board consider waiting one more year to allow staff time to plan. The speaker asked whether the ballot could be changed to reflect an operational or nonoperational decision effective in a later year and expressed concern for what would happen to staff.
    - **Response:**
      The board stated its responsibility is to review all available data and make a recommendation it believes is best for students long-term. The board emphasized that the decision will be made by the voters. The superintendent stated that staff work under association contracts with reduction-in-force rights districtwide and that he does not see anyone losing their jobs.
- Lance Howard asked about Stamford's numbers - feels the whole thing stinks
    - **Response:** provided later in the meeting
      Bill Bazyk report Stamford has 62

Groupings, including 11 students in PreK through grade 2, 13 students in grades 3–4, and 19 students in grades 5–8.

- A parent stated they personally wanted school choice for their child, particularly at the high school level.
    - **Response:**
      The board stated that becoming a non-operating district would provide school choice for all grade levels. Any future merger that could affect school choice would require additional meetings and a separate town vote.
- A parent of a child with an IEP stated concern about declining enrollment alongside increased special education needs and asked how those needs would be addressed if the school changed status.
    - **Response:**
      The board stated that special education does not change whether a school is operating or non-operating and that plans follow the students.
- David Marchegiani, a grandparent, stated they were “looking at facts,” including national and state test scores, declining performance, and increasing homeschooling. The speaker expressed support for closing the school and reopening under a different educational model.
    - **Response:**
      The administration stated that statewide test scores are declining, comparisons are difficult in very small sample sizes, and that improving educational outcomes requires addressing cost, staffing capacity, and instructional models.
- A parent asked whether neighboring schools could accept all Readsboro students and whether siblings could attend the same school under school choice.
    - **Response:**
      The superintendent stated that Halifax, Twin Valley Elementary, and Stamford would all be able to take all current students and could take all 37 Readsboro students.
- A parent asked what would happen if the state were to take action if the district does not.
    - **Response:**
      Cindy stated that a state map has not yet been made and that it is still unclear how districts would be assigned. Bill stated that, based on his understanding, Stamford and Twin Valley would likely remain open, while Halifax would not qualify as small by necessity and could be subject to change.
- The Board was asked what would become of the school building if Readsboro became a non-operating tuition district.
    - **Response:**
      Cindy stated that there are several options on the table, but the Board is not going down that road yet and does not want to discuss the building until the outcome of a vote is known.

- A parent asked about the wording of the vote and whether voting to close the school would result in school choice for all grades.
    - **Response:**
      Cindy stated a “yes” vote would result in school choice for all grades. If the Town later wished to pursue a merger, there would need to be additional meetings with another town vote. Jim stated that the town would vote on whether to pursue a merger and what options would be considered, and that no merger could occur without voter approval.
- A parent of a seventh grader stated that parents want what is best for their children and asked whether all tuition and financial information would be available prior to the vote.
    - **Response:**
      Bill stated that both the operating and non-operating budgets are included in the informational packet that was circulated. He stated that the district has done modeling, including tax modeling, for potential scenarios involving Stamford and Twin Valley. He noted that modeling becomes more complex when adding other districts and tax revenues, but stated that additional modeling can be done to help inform the community. He emphasized that reviewing the two budgets provides a good baseline for understanding the financial impacts. Cindy added that keeping the school operational would result in an estimated 17.44% increase from the current year's budget, along with additional costs of $15,000-$20,000 for consultants to improve the school, as well as the additional money needed for maintenance.
- A parent asked whether the projected budget increase included major improvements to the building and specifically asked whether there was a lead drinking water issue in the school.
    - **Response:**
      Bill stated that the operating and non-operating budget comparisons did not include additional capital or operational improvements needed to keep the building running. He stated that lead testing had been conducted and that the results were sent home to parents. He explained that each fixture is tested individually and that certain faucets showed higher concentrations of lead and were shut off, while others met the standard. He stated that fixtures that did not meet the standard would be remedied. He added that addressing plumbing issues could involve costs in the tens of thousands of dollars and noted that there are additional building needs, including replacing the front door.
- A parent asked whether students currently attending McCann would be grandfathered into school choice if a future merger with Twin Valley occurred.
    - **Response:**
      Bill stated that under current law, school choice would be lost in a K–12 merger, but he believes that if people came together and proposed solutions that made sense, there could be carve-outs. He stated that he does not believe students would be taken out of schools they are already attending.
- A parent asked about the bus situation for families living on the hill.

- **Response:**
  Jim stated that the current bus runs along Route 100 for elementary students and runs a separate route for high school students, using the same bus at different times. He stated that this is how transportation currently works and is expected to remain the same moving forward.

- A parent asked which school would be better academically if a merger occurred.
  - **Response:**
    Bill stated that academic comparisons are difficult in very small schools because statistically meaningful comparisons require larger sample sizes. He stated that you do not get a statistically accurate number with fewer than 40 students and that testing a classroom of 10 students does not provide reliable comparisons. He explained that differences in student ability, background, and circumstances can significantly affect results in small samples. He stated that because of this, it is hard to compare test scores between schools in the supervisory union. He explained that the focus should be on educational opportunities, staffing capacity, and the ability to provide interventions, enrichment, and instructional support that are difficult to sustain in micro-sized schools.

- A parent raised concerns about student safety and transportation, citing longer bus rides on mountain roads, winter conditions, and increased risk.
  - **Response:**
    The 45-minute travel time is a state standard and that Stamford and Twin Valley are significantly closer. Students are already riding these routes, and transportation would remain the same.

- Several speakers stated that teachers work very hard, that community events are well attended, and that the school continues to serve as an important part of the town.
  - **Response:**
    The board acknowledged the dedication of staff and the strong community support for school events.

- A parent asked why act now and whether the state could close the school if minimum standards are not met.
  - **Response:**
    Cindy stated that after July 1, there may be changes to Act 73 that may limit or eliminate the ability to become a non-operating school district, and that the risk of state intervention increases as districts become unsustainable. Bill explained that per-pupil spending is calculated by dividing total costs by the number of students, and as enrollment declines, taxes increase. He stated that there is not a significant savings between operating and non-operating budgets, with estimated savings of approximately $165,000 to $200,000. He stated that larger savings could come from a merger, as tuition costs are higher than reported per-pupil costs, and that a merger with Stamford would result in a lower per-pupil rate. Cindy noted that any merger would require agreement from both towns.

- A parent asked whether transportation would be provided for preschool students if the school becomes non-operating or if a merger occurs.

- **Response:**
  The Board stated that transportation currently begins at kindergarten. Kindergarten through grade 12 students would be able to travel on existing bus routes. Pre-K students are not currently transported, that would be a board-level decision and that the issue could be revisited depending on future needs.

- A parent asked whether homeschool students returning would change eligibility to remain open.
  - **Response:**
    Even with homeschool students returning, enrollment would not meet the state minimum standards referenced.

- Jonathan Cooper, the state representative, stated that Act 73 has not provided clarity, that major changes occurred late in the legislative process, and that school boards are making decisions without finalized guidance. The representative commended the board for attempting to make decisions with limited information and offered to continue discussions with constituents.

IV. Hearing of Visitors / Public Comment

No additional comments

V. Adjournment

Jim moved to adjourn at 7:17 PM; seconded by Helyn. *Motion passed.*