

Rural School Briefing – 7/20/23

LD from FRCOG, member of Rural Schools Commission in role on RPAC, former small, rural town SC Member

There has been a 20.8% decline in K-12 public school enrollment between 2010 and 2019 in FC. This does not mean there has been a 20.8% decrease in school costs. Even with closing of schools and combining of some grades into one classroom, we still have to have schools, classrooms, teachers, administration, etc. and we still have the legacy costs (pensions and health insurance of retired teachers) from a period of more robust enrollment.

Current 2020 to 2050 population projections anticipate a precipitous loss in population in Franklin County and an aging population.

Schools are often the community centers of our small, rural towns. Providing quality education is critical to retaining the young families we have and attracting new families to our region, which is essential for our economic development; our quality of life; honestly, the very future of our region.

On the revenue side, our towns are largely or exclusively reliant on residential property tax. 460,000 acres of land in Franklin County is permanently protected state-owned land – 4 of 26 towns have more than 40% of their land area permanently protected.

Because of no industrial or commercial activity and so much untaxable land, tax rates are high in many towns – 4 of 26 towns have tax rates higher than \$20/1000 and another 12 above \$15/1000. Six of our town are among the 10 towns with the highest residential tax rates in the state. Several are nearing their 2 ½ threshold.

The average percent of municipal budgets dedicated to education in FC munis is 49.6% of total municipal revenues and in 7 of our towns it is 58% or higher of total municipal budgets. This leaves little for all other municipal needs. This reduces the overall municipal capacity to provide other basic services, which also limits the ability to pursue grants and projects to address deficient infrastructure, limited water and sewer, and critical social issues.

State funding formulas that rely on population as a predominant factor (most of them) have been shown by numerous studies of the state auditor to be inequitable, unfair and detrimental to rural communities.

H3567/S2388 - An Act to provide a sustainable future for rural schools is critical to begin to stabilize rural communities, which makes for a stronger Commonwealth overall.