

## School officials request Heath vote on changing assessment formula

By MARY BYRNE, Staff Writer, Published: 9/8/2023 4:42:57 PM

HEATH — School officials are asking the town to convene a Special Town Meeting to approve an amendment to the Mohawk Trail Regional School District agreement that aims to bring it “in line with” the way the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education counts students.

In a presentation to the Selectboard this week, Mohawk Trail Regional School District School Committee member Budge Litchfield explained that while the state’s enrollment formula takes into account every child attending public schools — including School Choice and charter students — in what it calls its “foundational enrollment” for calculating state aid, Mohawk Trail’s formula for calculating student enrollment does not.

Town assessments are determined by counting the number of students enrolled on a five-year rolling average in the district. This is called “complete enrollment.” Depending on the ratio of students enrolled over that five-year period, each town pays its portion of the school budget.

“Let’s get the way we count ... in line with the way DESE counts [students] and the way that is fair,” Litchfield said.

Officials will speak further about the proposal to amend the regional agreement during the Budget Subcommittee meeting on Tuesday, Sept. 12, as well as at the full School Committee meeting on Wednesday, Sept. 13.

To date, five of the eight member towns have supported changing the Mohawk Trail Regional School District agreement. Shelburne, Plainfield and Heath are the last of the towns left to vote, according to Superintendent Sheryl Stanton. Litchfield said for the amendment to “become reality,” it needs to be approved before the end of the current fiscal year, or June 30, 2024. For that reason, school officials are asking Heath to consider a Special Town Meeting, rather than wait to vote on the change at Annual Town Meeting in the spring.

“It’s a significant change, but not a scary change that’s going to bankrupt the town,” said Litchfield, who serves as the Heath representative to the School Committee.

Mohawk Trail Regional School District Business Administrator William Lataille, who created the formula presented to Selectboard members, emphasized that the amendment seeks to create a more “level playing field” for determining each town’s financial contribution toward the school budget. He acknowledged that some towns may see increases in their assessments, while others may see decreases.

The changes would come incrementally, with the assessment changing over the course of five years. Because the budget is calculated using a five-year rolling average, it would take the budget five years to adjust to a new policy.

How the revised formula impacts individual towns is “all relative,” Stanton noted. Ashfield, for example, has a larger School Choice number than it is currently assessed for; by comparison, Buckland does not use School Choice to the same degree.

While Heath Selectboard members primarily asked clarifying questions, particularly relating to the timing of a Town Meeting and whether it had to be voted on at a Special Town Meeting, the proposed amendment was met with resistance from resident Ken Rocke, who expressed doubt in the validity of the formula.

“I think the actual impact on Heath ... really could be quite different,” he said.

When asked by Rocke if there is the potential to project what the impact on Heath would be five years in the future, Lataille responded that there are too many variables, such as the district’s minimum contribution and the town budget, to do so.

“Your percentage [of the assessment], hopefully, would remain about the same if enrollment stays about the same ... but we don’t know what’s going to happen,” Lataille said. “There are a lot of ‘what ifs,’ which is why we didn’t go forward five years. There’s really no way to predict five years out what any budget is going to look like.”

Still, Rocke was hesitant to accept the formula as presented.

“Heath has, by far, the highest percentage of students ... who are choicing or chartering out,” he argued. “On a proportionate basis, therefore, Heath has to be impacted much more strongly by this change than any other town. Buckland has ... one of the lowest percentages. They’re going to be impacted in the opposite direction. There are going to be winners and losers in this.”

There was some discussion as to whether the amendment — which was initially voted down at Annual Town Meeting in May — could be the topic of a Special Town Meeting, given that voters were told at the time that it could be brought to the table again at another annual meeting.

According to Town Coordinator Hilma Sumner, whether the proposed amendment appears before voters at a Special Town Meeting or an Annual Town Meeting is up to the discretion of the Selectboard. She did note, however, that the quorum for a latter is 10%, compared to 5% for a Special Town Meeting.

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