

# **FIRST BRANCH UNIFIED DISTRICT PROPOSAL**

## **A merger between Chelsea & Tunbridge School Districts**

This proposal was developed by a subcommittee of the White River Valley Supervisory Union's original PreK-6/8 Study Committee. The subcommittee consisted of community members and school board members from both towns. The proposal outlines a Chelsea & Tunbridge consolidated school district that offers local education for students in grades PreK-8 and high school choice for students in grades 9-12.

The proposal was approved by the subcommittee on January 30, 2017. It was approved by the VT Board of Education on February 21, 2017.

**THE MERGER WILL BE VOTED ON IN CHELSEA & TUNBRIDGE ON  
TUESDAY, APRIL 11, 2017.**

**Polls will be open in both communities from 7:00 am – 7:00 pm.**

**Voting in Chelsea will take place in the Town Hall by Australian ballot.**

Complete details for this proposal can be found in the full report at <http://www.chelseaschoolvt.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/WHITE-RIVER-VALLEY-SUPERVISORY-UNION-STUDY-COMMITTEES-Final-Report-2-6-17.pdf>.

### **Merged district details:**

**ONE SCHOOL BOARD** – 3 members from each town; both towns vote on all members.

**ONE BUDGET** – single pre-Common Level of Appraisal tax rate.

- Potential efficiencies in joint purchasing, staffing, facility oversight, curriculum, etc.

**TWO ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS** – one in each town.

- Coordinated curriculums, unified staff
- Process for school choice between two schools could be available
- Increased offerings shared across elementary & middle schools
- Greater capacity to meet diverse needs of all children

**MERGED MIDDLE SCHOOL PROGRAM** - with immediate exploration of one merged middle school campus.

- The timing will be for the new board to determine.
- This proposal is based on a premise that a merged middle school is in the best educational interest of students in both communities.
- Larger peer groups are more developmentally appropriate for this age.
- Differentiated course offerings (Ex: more than one section per subject)
- Opportunities for enhanced course offerings (foreign language, hands-on, etc.)
- A merged middle school offers the most significant chance for savings.

**HIGH SCHOOL CHOICE** - students in grades 9-12 have full school choice.

- The merged school district would pay full tuition to any public high school in Vermont.
- The merged district would pay the state-wide tuition average to any private school or out of state school. Parents are responsible for any cost above this average.
- Note: Hanover High School and Rivendell High School are considered Vermont high schools because each is part of a VT-NH district.
- Busing to and from nearby high school(s) where a large number of Chelsea & Tunbridge students attend is a strong possibility, but would be negotiated with each high school. Families would be responsible for transportation to schools for which no busing is in place.

**Merged District Anticipated Savings:**

- ✓ Every proposal put before the State Board of Education must make a case for economic efficiencies that can be realized through consolidation.
- ✓ Projected savings are based on a model with a merged middle school with one campus. Savings in personnel are the primary source of efficiency.
- ✓ \$250,000 savings in year one projected. (Referred to in full report.)

**Act 46 Incentives**

Tax incentives over the first four years of operation (\$.08, .06, .04, .02)

Retain small schools grants as “Merger Support Grants” Chelsea: \$135,462 Tunbridge: \$96,773

“Hold Harmless” feature retained to protect if Average Daily Membership (ADM) falls by more than 3.5%...also called “Phantom Students”

## **Merged District Board Members:**

- New board members for the merged district will be voted into office on April 11, 2017: 3 Chelsea members and 3 Tunbridge members. Voters from both towns will vote on all members.
  - If individuals are interested in running for this new board, 30 signatures are required by March 11. Please contact your local town clerk for details as soon as possible.
  - New merged district board members would begin to serve in July 1, 2017 to begin planning for the implementation of the merged district in the 2018-2019 school year.
  - Present school board members would continue to serve until the newly merged district takes effect, overseeing the status quo of the two individual districts.
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## **THE APRIL 11<sup>TH</sup> VOTE:**

All mergers in WRVSU hinge on the success of the proposed PreK-12/ union high school merger because every Regional Education District must contain one merged district that operates grades PreK-12. A Chelsea/Tunbridge merged district would operate side-by-side with this PreK-12 district.

**IF** the PreK-12 merger *is passed by all three participating towns (Rochester, Royalton, and Bethel)* on April 11,

**AND** *Chelsea and Tunbridge voters approve* the First Branch Unified District merger, the *terms of Act 46 will be satisfied*; therefore

- all towns will qualify for tax incentives & preserve their small schools grants
- all merging towns avoid any potential involuntary merger imposed by the state.

**IF** the PreK-12 merger *fails in any of the three participating towns (Rochester, Royalton, or Bethel)* on April 11,

The *Chelsea/Tunbridge merger automatically fails*, even if it is approved by Chelsea & Tunbridge voters.

Towns can vote again. Mergers must pass by July 1, 2017 to receive tax incentives.

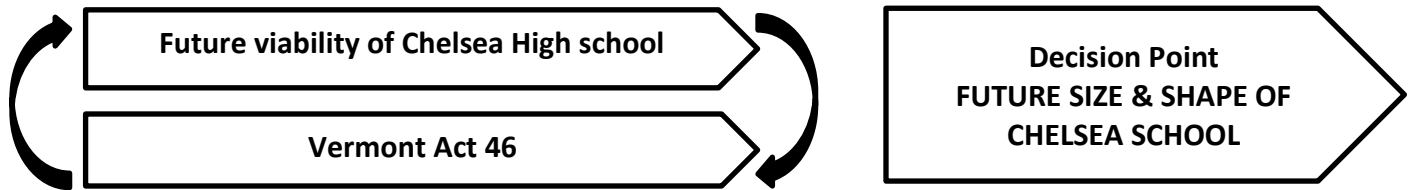
**IF** *Chelsea and Tunbridge voters approve* the First Branch Unified District merger

**BUT** the PreK-12 merger *fails*, the Chelsea & Tunbridge boards and communities will need decide if a merger is still the best educational delivery system for our towns, even without any financial incentives.

# Frequently Asked Questions

## What has led us to this point in time?

Two parallel and intersecting conversations have been taking place in Chelsea for a number of years. The longest conversation has focused on the question of whether we can or should sustain a high school into the future. Then in 2015, Vermont passed Act 46, a new law seeking to consolidate school districts and school boards. The demands and incentives built into this Act, layered on top of the tough questions already being asked in Chelsea, have brought the future size and shape of the Chelsea School to the forefront of our community conversations and planning.



## What does Chelsea School look like now?

*Below is an excerpt from Principal, Mark Blount's, public remarks at Town Meeting on March 8, 2017.*

This year, our total enrollment has remained relatively stable. We had a total of 191 PK-12 students last year compared to our present 186 students. At our high school, with fewer tuition students from our sending schools and students taking advantage of multiple pathway opportunities at RTCC and VAST led to lower enrollment at our school. Looking ahead, the school is projecting 12 new kindergarten students in the fall. Currently, our PreK-5 and grades 6-8 enrollments are at 98 and 36 students respectively. Total enrollment at grades 9-12 fell from 64 students to 52 students. The school is projecting a total enrollment K-12 at 177 students this fall. The school has 12 tuition students, down from 18 students last year. Most of the school's tuition students come from Tunbridge and Washington.

## What are the basics of Act 46?

- Addresses quality, inequity of student opportunity & ever-increasing cost-per-student.
- Calls for the creation of larger school *districts* to remedy these concerns.
- Asks local regions to come together and design a path on their own.
- Includes financial incentives for districts to unify.

## Where did Chelsea start?

Since much of the focus for potential change was about the high school, the school board put 5 options on the table for exploration. These options were discussed at a community forum in April 2016. Representatives from VT Agency of Education and VT School Boards Association also gave an overview presentation on Act 46 and fielded questions.

1. Maintain our current structure as a PreK-12 school.
2. Merge with Bethel, Rochester & South Royalton in a consolidated school district.
3. Operate a PreK-8 school and offer high school choice.
4. Operate a PreK-8 school and designate 1-3 high schools.
5. Merge with a district outside our supervisory union. (For example: Randolph)

Notes from this forum and answers to Act 46 questions at the forum can be found at: <http://www.chelseaschoolvt.org/>

## **Initial exploration activities**

- Randolph, Williamstown, Northfield, South Royalton school visits by committee of students, staff, parents, and board members
- Additional community forums/surveys to gather feedback: Oct & Nov 2016
- Evolving context for sustainability of our high school: enrollment/cost/offerings
- **PreK-12 Study Committee** – formed in July 2016. Chelsea was an original member along with Bethel, Royalton & Rochester looking at a model with separate elementary schools, a joint middle school and a union high school in South Royalton.
- Chelsea moved away from this table based on community feedback when the model no longer included a middle school in Chelsea.

We heard:

- Keep students local longer
- Questions about feasibility of transporting middle school students to Bethel (site of joint middle school)
- Growing interest in high school choice

## **How did we move from one study committee to another?**

In December 2016, after Chelsea moved away from PreK-12 study committee discussions, the Chelsea and Tunbridge school boards realized each of our explorations with other communities had not produced viable options. With a strong history of collaboration in our schools, many joint meetings under our belts, and a growing understanding of our two towns' similarities, we formed a subcommittee to explore a merger. The result is the merger proposal we will consider in both town votes on April 11.

## **Why doesn't the proposal submitted to the State Board of Education, which details the expectations of the merger, go into more detail on things like educational benefits and class offerings and course redesign?**

The committee working on this proposal began meeting in December when the Chelsea school board indicated they were no longer considering the Union High School a viable option for their community and were considering a PK-8 structure. Given tight timelines imposed by Act 46, the committee felt that we could not do justice to that level of work in the short timeframe we had. Instead we took an approach to determine if we thought the two communities were capable of collaboration. We strongly feel the communities are and believe that from that, a new board can create enhanced educational opportunities and improved student experiences. We intend to leave the details to the new school board as they would have over a year to plan for the opening of the newly combined school district.

## **Is it true that even if Chelsea and Tunbridge residents approve this merger, it might still fail to comply with Act 46 if the South Royalton-Bethel-Rochester merger fails?**

Yes. Under the current formulation of Act 46, a side-by-side model (which we are pursuing) requires at least one merger in the side-by-side to include a PK-12 merger. Our side-by-side merger requires that the South Royalton-Bethel-Rochester pass AND that either the Chelsea-Tunbridge merger pass OR the Granville-Hancock merger pass. There is a proposed change to the rule that would eliminate this requirement, but that proposed change will not have been voted on by the legislature before our April 11 vote.

### **If this merger proposal passes, when will Chelsea High School close?**

If the merger proposal passes on April 11, 2017, the Chelsea High School would close after the 2017-2018 school year. The class of 2018 would be the last class to graduate from Chelsea High School.

If the merger proposal fails on April 11, 2017, the school board will then need to determine whether to put another vote before the town. This could be another vote on the merger proposal to see if the town will reconsider. It could be a vote to simply close the high school, regardless of any merger with any district, to offer choice or to designate up the 3 high schools.

### **What will happen to Chelsea teachers/faculty/staff?**

This is one of the most difficult pieces of the future puzzle. We have many professionals who have dedicated themselves to the education of our Chelsea students. If the high school closes, our faculty will experience a Reduction in Force. The faculty positions that teach only high school courses will be eliminated. The faculty positions that teach some high school courses or offer some high school services, in addition to other grades, will be reduced. All decisions made will be according to the Negotiated Agreement with the Chelsea Teachers Organization and follow the agreement's mandates for Reduction in Force, seniority, etc.

### **What happens to existing Chelsea scholarships?**

The school board will need to research and contact the fund associated with each individual scholarship to explore options for future awards. Each separate scholarship comes with its own rules and limitations that would need to be modified. The hope is that some scholarships would still be able to follow Chelsea students no matter their school of graduation.

### **How will we review and vote on the budget in the new merged school district?**

A school budget meeting will be held just as it is done now, only it will be a combined meeting including residents from both towns. Current proposal is to alternate the meeting between the towns in subsequent years. The budget vote will occur as it does now. Nominations to the school board will continue to be done from the floor.

### **Is the formation of a high school 'academy,' an option in Chelsea?**

Yes. If the voters voted to close the high school, then the school district could lease or sell the buildings to another entity, including to an approved independent school. Chelsea would need to designate the independent school as the public high school and pay the full tuition amount per Chelsea student. (This is the scenario in Thetford.) The school remains a private entity with a privately selected board of directors, with no requirement to share financial information publicly (or to give the public an opportunity to vote or weigh-in on it), and no obligation to hold public meetings. The school board is not pursuing this as a viable option.

**PLEASE VOTE ON APRIL 11<sup>TH</sup>**

**7:00 AM – 7:00 PM IN THE CHELSEA TOWN HALL**