



Tuesday, April 01, 2008

Surry school exit: not so fast

[State says town still linked to Unit 38](#)

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WINCHESTER - When Monadnock district voters gave the okay to "let Surry go," it didn't mean the town would leave the N.H. School Administrative Unit 38, according to state officials.

And on July 1, Surry will become a fourth sibling within the unit - whether the rest of the family likes it or not.

Members of N.H. School Administrative Unit 38 school board previously decided that if Surry withdrew from the Monadnock district, it should also leave the unit. But state law says the town remains part of the unit unless it chooses to leave Sarah L. Browning, a legislation and hearings administrator with the N.H. Department of Education, told the unit school board Monday night.

"Surry is still a part of SAU 38 and therefore they're entitled to the same SAU services as any other member of the SAU," she said. Surry can only leave Unit 38 by a process similar to its withdrawal from the Monadnock district, according to Browning.

This has angered numerous board members from Hinsdale and Winchester, towns that were not able to weigh in on Surry's withdrawal from the Monadnock Regional School District but which must now shoulder the added administrative burden as Surry becomes its own district within the unit.

"Hinsdale and Winchester were never part of this process," said Wayne Temmen, Hinsdale School Board chairman. "And now you're asking our districts to pony up money to cover the cost of Surry getting out and joining the SAU."

In November, voters from the Monadnock Regional School District - which covers Fitzwilliam, Gilsum, Richmond, Roxbury, Sullivan, Surry, Swanzey and Troy - gave a green light to Surry's withdrawal from the Monadnock district.

This will become effective July 1, when Surry will become the fourth district in Unit 38, which now encompasses the Monadnock, Hinsdale and Winchester districts.

Prior to the November vote, Unit 38 board members agreed if Surry withdrew from the Monadnock district, it should also withdraw from the school administrative unit.

"I am morally opposed to Hinsdale and Winchester paying a dime for Surry" to remain in the unit, said Colline Dreyfuss, a board member from Swanzey, Monday night.

But David H. Bradley, Surry's attorney, said the town is entitled to administrative support.

"I think the law's pretty clear that Surry's still part of this SAU, and you owe them superintendent services," he said, leaving open the possibility that the matter could be resolved in court.

Surry needs immediate support, including help completing all the paperwork for the new school district budget town residents will consider later

this month, he said after the meeting.

"Surry's position is not 'Hey, let's put the squeeze on you folks,' " said Timothy Peloquin, a Surry school board member who is also Surry's representative to the Monadnock school board. "Surry just wants to steer on its own ship and provide what they feel is the best opportunity for their children."

Peloquin said Surry hopes to eventually join another supervisory unit - likely Unit 29 in Keene, where most of Surry's students will attend high school.

But help putting together a new school district represents services above and beyond its current position as a member of the Monadnock district, according to Winchester School Board Chairman Colleen A. Duquette.

"Until June 30, (Surry's) part of Monadnock, so whatever services they're entitled to from April 1 to June 30 falls under their membership in the cooperative," said Paul L. Apple, an attorney representing Unit 38. "But the statute doesn't speak to what services are we obligated to provide to some sort of nascent district that exists in part but not in full."

And, as it enters these gray areas, the state has very little precedent to reference. Only one other town in the state - Moultonborough - had previously withdrawn from its school district, according to Browning, who said Mason is now undergoing the process.

To make matters even more confusing, Unit 38 board members recently approved a \$1,772,572 default budget - a sum drawn up to cover only the Monadnock, Hinsdale and Winchester districts.

Surry residents must now vote on the amount they'll contribute to this budget, but, by law, Unit 38 cannot change its bottom-line number, according to Katherine E.L. Chambers. So, a budget devised to cover three school districts must now stretch to four.

After much discussion, the board opened the door to compromise Monday, voting to create a transition committee to negotiate a possible fee agreement with Surry for services. And to address Surry's short-term needs, the board agreed to give the town a total of 10 hours of Chambers' time to lend Surry advice through May.

The board also decided to create a committee to speak with the state Department of Education about board members' concerns the department improperly let the withdrawal vote go on the ballot while so many questions remained unresolved.

After Monday's votes, both sides offered tempered optimism.

"There was some movement. I was pleased," said Bradley, Surry's attorney. And Dassau called the meeting "a positive first step."

Still, Peloquin said Surry will stand firm as it moves forward with leaving the Monadnock district.

"The bottom line is ... if we can't do it friendly, we're going to do it ugly," he said. "This district doesn't need another ugly."

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