

The Opponents Counter Cronin – Republican American April 1, 2007

WOODBURY Superintendent Robert D. Cronin, who proposed the district school reconfiguration last year, has listed a number of reasons why the plan makes sense.

First, it would make better use of district resources. Competition would be reduced among Bethlehem and Mitchell Elementary schools for the same materials, and their libraries would be strengthened because the librarians would be purchasing materials for children within a narrower grade span.

Other points, according to Cronin, would be:

Reconfiguration increases chances of delivering a guaranteed and viable curriculum in each grade throughout the district.

It takes Mitchell fifth-grade students out of Woodbury Middle School and puts them back at the elementary level. Having students remain on one "campus" for grades three through five, Cronin said, allows teachers of each grade level to have regular and ongoing contact with one another, sharing ideas about teaching and learning, all of which enhance professional development.

It preserves Mitchell as a school. It would not be converted to a Town Hall for Woodbury.

It allows implementation of new programs, such as a full-day kindergarten and "teaming" at the middle school. Cronin said it would be more difficult to institute a full-day kindergarten with the current school setups because space would be at a premium.

The "team" concept has groups of teachers within a building responsible for a certain segment of the student population, say 75 students, allowing teachers and their teams to become more familiar with each other, and to ease planning for activities.

Student enrollments at the elementary schools would become more balanced. Current enrollments are 335 at Bethlehem and 474 at Mitchell. The reconfiguration would put the projected enrollments at 430 at Bethlehem and 459 at Mitchell for 2007-08.

Whose decision?

Cronin said the school board and communities had been discussing space needs issues for two to three years already, and had watched both a property purchase referendum in 2004 and a Mitchell renovation referendum in 2006 fail.

By October 2006, Cronin felt enough conversations and interactions had taken place to proceed with the reconfiguration plan, which the board believed was its decision to make.

Region 14 attorney Roseanne Padula said the board was within its legal rights to act on the reconfiguration based on a description of the duties of boards of education contained in state statute 10-220. Specifically, she said that statute says, in part, that "each local or regional board of education shall maintain good public elementary and secondary schools, implement the educational interests of the state as defined in section 10-4a and provide such other educational activities as in its judgment will best serve the interests of the school district. ..."

Padula said the state statute section says a board "shall designate the schools which will be attended by the various children within the school district. ..."

Families for Region 14

A group of residents from Woodbury and Bethlehem known as the Families for Region 14 Elementary organized to oppose reconfiguration.

The group's officers, all from Woodbury, are Erica Barber, chairwoman, Pamela Gengenbach, treasurer, and James Conway, secretary and deputy treasurer. There are also 17 individuals listed as coordinators on the organization's Web site ([www.saveregion14elementary.com](http://www.saveregion14elementary.com)); the phone number is (203) 228-4582.

The group's watchwords are "Together Our Voices Will Be Heard."

Opposition has centered on five main points: the reconfiguration plan was hastily passed by the school board without proper community input; the alleged benefits of the plan would not justify the upheaval in the communities and in children's lives by displacing more than 400

children; busing children across the 60-square-mile district would be fiscally irresponsible and force some children to catch a bus as early as 7:20 a.m.; instructional time would be cut back at both the middle school and Nonnewaug High School to accommodate the new scheduling structure; and that the plan fails to recognize the importance of having local schools within a community.

A group of Bethlehem residents, led by attorney Thomas L. Brayton III, said Woodbury and Bethlehem, in 1968, entered into a contract known as the Final Report of the Temporary Regional School Study Committee when the Region 14 district was created. The report became commonly referred to as the "plan."

A referendum took place on May 20, 1968, and the vote to establish a regional school district passed by a 534-68 count.

According to the residents, the plan recommended having K-5 grades housed in elementary school buildings in both towns, and state statutes (10-47c) require a referendum be held if terms of the plan are amended.

A precedent of sorts was set in 1975 in a *Mary Atwood et al v. Regional School District No. 15* case before the Connecticut Supreme Court. The case focused on the need for a referendum to appropriate money for a regional high school. While the plaintiffs lost, the statutory significance of 10-47c was upheld, the Bethlehem residents said, and would apply to any fundamental changes (i.e., reconfiguration) being made to the 1968 contract.

Bethlehem Town Attorney Michael D. Rybak, in a six-page opinion rendered Feb. 22, said it is not clear whether the Region 14 reconfiguration plan is a fundamental change, or whether the realignment is a matter "exclusively within the authority and statutory obligation" of the Region 14 board, as maintained by its counsel.

Rybak said it is a "close question" that only a court can "ultimately answer."

Board attorney Padula also has countered there is a crucial "page 16" of the final report that does not support Brayton's and the Bethlehem

residents' contention there has to be K-5 grades in both towns. That page reads: "It should be pointed out that the program and facilities discussed in this report are the recommendations of the Bethlehem-Woodbury Temporary Regional School Study Committee. Should a region be established, the Regional Board of Education would determine the exact programs and facilities for the district. The Regional Board of Education is bound only by the broad provisions outlined in the referendum proposed on page 1 of this report."

The language in the referendum asked if Woodbury and Bethlehem should join together "in the establishment of a regional school district with the schools located in the towns of Bethlehem and Woodbury for the purpose of providing the necessary facilities and administering grades kindergarten through 12 of the public schools?"