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8 Town Board Votes “Yes” on Merger
Community to Vote this Fall

On July 18, the 8 Town Regional School District Planning Board voted 16-2 (with two abstentions) to recommend the merger of the Berkshire Hills Regional School District and Southern Berkshire Regional School District.

The 24-member Board (with 3 appointed representatives from each of the 8 towns) was formed in March 2020 to study a possible merger in the face of declining enrollment and rising operating costs. In April 2021, the Board voted to develop the merger model recommended by its expert research team, which was to keep the elementary and middle schools in place as they are, and construct a new merged 9-12 high school, with new vocational facilities, on the Great Barrington campus. Since that vote, the Board has been developing and testing the assumptions supporting that recommended model.

“After three years of careful research, our board has concluded that the proposed merger presents the best path forward for our students and our community,” said Lucy Prashker, Chair of the 8 Town Board.

Prashker added that the Board’s recommendation identifies important educational benefits and opportunities as well as significant cost savings that could be realized from the two districts’ pooling resources and achieving economies of scale. Its decision was also informed by broad community outreach, including surveys, student forums, focus groups, forums, and open community gatherings.

“South Berkshire, like other parts of Berkshire County, has experienced staggering declines in student enrollment over the last two decades, a trend that is expected to continue,” explained Prashker. “Those declining enrollments put a tremendous strain on our ability to just maintain what we have, much less to expand those offerings. By joining together, we will be able to provide the educational enhancements our children need and deserve in a way that is sustainable and our 8 towns can afford.”

According to the findings of its educational quality subcommittee, a merged high school would allow for new and expanded vocational opportunities as well as expanded academic choices for college-bound students, more electives and extracurricular activities, optimized class sizes, and a more inclusive and diverse school population. For all grades, a merger would result in broader access to resources for English Language Learners, special education, and social-emotional support, and more professional development and other opportunities for teachers.

While transportation was identified as a potential concern of a proposed merger, an independent study demonstrated that the time most students would spend on a bus would either stay the same or decrease. Assuming a relatively modest investment in additional vans, the maximum bus time is expected to decrease from 1 hour to 45 minutes. The merger would also allow a two-tier transportation system for the students in all towns, allowing elementary school students to ride separately from high schoolers. (Currently only BHRSD has a two-tier system.)

“Building a state-of-the-art high school will be a huge win for the students of all 8 towns,” said Deb Phillips, chair of the Board’s educational quality subcommittee. “Merger would also allow us to increase the salaries of the Southern Berkshire Regional School District faculty to achieve parity with those at Berkshire Hills.”

The Board’s July 18 vote included approval of a draft regional agreement, which the board has been working on for close to a year. Following some expected additional input from Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and legal counsel, the Board expects to vote on a final version of that agreement in late August, together with a written statement of the reasons for the merger, to be presented to the Selectboards of the 8 towns. The Board will announce additional public forums where community members can learn more about the benefits. The voters of the 8 towns will decide whether to merge at special town meetings, which are expected to be held in October.

Visit 8towns.org for more information about the RSDPB and the benefits of merging districts.

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