

Sandisfield Seeks Amendment to Regional School District Agreement

The Farmington River Regional School District (FRRSD) School Committee (SC) consists of four members elected by Otis and three members elected by Sandisfield, as specified in the Regional District Agreement (RDA). The RDA has never been amended since its inception in 1992. The RDA can be amended only by affirmative town votes from each of the two towns. Once one of two conditions is met, town votes must be held on a proposed amendment. One is the SC voting in favor of the proposed amendment. The other is a citizen's petition from one of the two towns indicating support of the proposed amendment by at least 10% of the town's registered voters.

The following proposed amendment was discussed by the School Committee in its January meeting:

"All motions on Committee business shall be decided by a majority vote of the quorum in attendance, unless otherwise required by law, provided that at least one Committee member from each town votes on the prevailing side of any such motion. This should apply to setting the agendas for future meetings as well."

Currently, motions are passed by the SC by a simple majority vote, with no requirement that the majority include at least one member from each town. In contrast, the RDA specifies – as it should - that a SC quorum requires a simple majority of members that includes at least one member from each town. The proposed amendment seeks to correct this inconsistency in the RDA. Since the SC can't transact business without a quorum consisting of a simple majority with at least one member from each town, why should the SC be able to pass motions based on a simple majority vote without at least one affirmative vote from each town? A particularly important reason to correct this inconsistency relates to the Massachusetts Open Meeting Law (OML). OML is intended to ensure that business transacted by a public body is transacted under the scrutiny of the public eye, in an open public meeting. However, it only precludes any quorum of the public body from deliberating on matters of the body outside of an open public meeting. Thus, OML does not preclude the four members of the SC elected from Otis from deliberating outside of an open public meeting, as this doesn't constitute a quorum of the SC. Yet, these four members have the ability today to pass a motion if they all vote in unison, even if all the members elected from Sandisfield vote against it. Under the proposed amendment, such a vote would not pass the motion.

In the January SC meeting, several SC members expressed their indignance that such an amendment was being discussed, along with their opinion that it was wholly unnecessary, and no vote was taken on the amendment. The subsequent February SC meeting did not include continuing discussion or a vote on the proposed amendment. Will the SC vote on the proposed amendment? If a vote is taken, will the amendment pass? Both answers may be "no". It thus seems prudent for Sandisfield to begin collecting signatures on a 10% citizens petition in support of the amendment. The Sandisfield Select Board supports this and would encourage all Sandisfield residents to sign this petition aimed at correcting obvious inconsistencies in the RDA and giving Sandisfield a fairer say and representation on the SC. A subsequent communication will provide information on when and where you can read and sign the petition.