

Hopedale Select Board
Multi-Community Summit re: Blackstone Valley Regional Vocational Technical School
October 26, 2023 at 7:00 p.m.
Hopedale Community House, 43 Hope Street, Hopedale, MA

In Attendance: Hopedale Select Board Chair Hazard, and members Mr. Stock, Mr. Savage
Hopedale Town Administrator M. Ruscitti and Executive Assistant K. Grant

Also in attendance were elected and appointed officials from the 13 Blackstone Valley Regional Vocational Technical School (BVT) member communities (Bellingham, Blackstone, Douglas, Grafton, Hopedale, Mendon, Milford, Millbury, Millville, Northbridge, Sutton, Upton, and Uxbridge) as well as Dr. Michael Fitzpatrick, BVT Superintendent-Director and members of the general public.

Quorum present and called to order at 7:00 p.m.

A. Multi-community summit regarding BVT spending, budgeting, and financial management:

Hopedale Select Board Chair Hazard began the summit by welcoming all those communities who were present and thanking them for their attendance. Chair Hazard went on to explain the purpose of the Summit and spoke about Hopedale's concerns and vision moving forward.

"I'm Glenda Hazard, chairwoman of the Hopedale Select Board. Thank you all for accepting our invitation. I'm really thrilled to see you all here.

Over the years, I've heard it said that the 13 towns in the BVT district don't really care how the rest of the towns in the district feel, and I called this meeting because I don't really believe that's true. There have been many times I've wondered how you all respond to the financial constraints the majority of us are facing, and if there are other related concerns we all share. To that end, I'm hoping this is the beginning of a meaningful collaboration between us all.

Tonight's summit is a result of us having heard from many surrounding communities with a desire to discuss budgetary issues related to our vocational school. We feel this is absolutely in the spirit of our charter. Speaking on behalf of Hopedale, we have long felt that our town's budgetary input for the Blackstone Valley Technical/Vocational School typically occurs too late.

Like many small communities in this corridor, Hopedale operates under a tight budget; as a result, we must be responsible for every dollar we spend. Presently, the state assessment process places increased burden on communities such as ours, and we find ourselves forced to cut local programs

and services in response to costs such as those related to BVT that we can't control.

This scenario makes it difficult, if not impossible, to invest in our own public-school students, facilities, and both operating and capital improvements without asking for additional revenues from taxpayers in the form of overrides.

But I want to be clear that the purpose of the meeting this evening is not to disparage BVT or any of its administrators. There is little question that BVT is a tremendous institution and one of the best technical schools in the Commonwealth. Rather, this meeting is to see if there is community consensus to address some of the institutional budgetary issues that have evolved over the years while the charter has remained unchanged.

Historically, by the time our Annual Town Meeting comes around, we are told that BVT already has enough votes in the other communities to pass, effectively negating our right to vote. Generally, we are presented with a figure that will be Hopedale's share - without input from our local Finance Committee or Select Board, and whether or not we feel we can afford it. This has been deeply concerning for both our boards and our residents, who tell us they feel cut out of the process. We've heard from several of you that your towns feel the same.

In Hopedale, we believe that as towns included in the Charter, we should all be able to determine what costs we can afford to send to BVT so that all students who reside in our towns are equitably supported. We often feel that the Hopedale Public Schools are forced to cut yet BVT hasn't had to make the same kind of sacrifices. And because our schools are adept at doing more with less, our students are often prioritized in BVT admissions, at a cost to our town in more than one way. When I taught in Hopedale, I can remember one particular student that needed and wanted to go to BVT. And so he went. It was that simple, but now that's not necessarily that case.

Last year in Hopedale, we asked voters to support an override, and even though it passed, we still had to make cuts to our schools while the BVT budget was up. Again, I want to reiterate that I'm glad BVT is a wonderful school, but we want all our schools to be wonderful.

Some ideas will be discussed tonight as a starting point – perhaps even the idea of a CAP, whether it be through a percentage of dollars or through a cap on overall enrollment, with the intent of easing the financial burden on communities.

It is clear that per capita, some communities are vastly over-represented at BVT, which places uneven financial hardship on certain communities. It is also clear that BVT admissions don't mirror a socioeconomic cross section of the 13 communities. This also contributes to the uneven allocation of financial burden. This is a systemic problem in the Commonwealth right now in vocational education. Comparing standardized testing and college matriculation compared to public non-vocational schools, show the changes in vocational education. To be blunt,

BVT can be more selective in admissions, which can unfairly punish communities whose public schools whose students are succeeding.

As an institution, we believe that BVT should have to operate within the same financial constraints that each municipal budget does. We, as Charter communities, need a better way to communicate with each other so that we are all in unison, wherever possible, on a BVT budget before our respective town budgeting processes begin. We feel it should be clear that the goal is to provide a great education for all students in our communities whether they go to BVT or stay in our local schools. We want to be able to invest in programs and facilities locally at the same level we invest at BVT, and to see those investments vetted in the same way we all vet and plan local projects.

Again, Hopedale is thrilled to host this important discussion and we are anxious to hear your concerns and ideas. It is our hope that tonight can be the start of a continuing conversation on our shared education mission.”

- B. Town Administrator Remarks: Hopedale Town Administrator Mitch Ruscitti suggested that those who wish to speak should focus on what the individual towns feel are their struggles and goals and avoid criticisms of individuals.
- C. Town Official Public Comment: At this time, any town who wished to address the attendees was invited to do so. Representatives from Bellingham, Millbury, Douglas, Milford, Hopedale, and Millville all addressed the crowd. The common theme among them being their feeling of not having a voice in the BVT budget process and BVT continuing act as though they have an “open checkbook” and are not held to the same constraints as the towns are.
- D. Remarks from Dr. Fitzpatrick BVT Superintendent: Dr. Fitzpatrick began by giving a brief overview of BVT’s financials and the school’s program offerings. He addressed some of the concerns expressed by member communities.
- E. Community Public Comments: Citizens were given the opportunity to offer comments and concerns as parents, taxpayers, and teachers in the feeder communities.
(To view the entire summit, including all comment sections, the video is located here: https://townhallstreams.com/stream.php?location_id=56&id=55893)
- F. The meeting concluded at 8:45 p.m.
- G. Chair Hazard adjourned the Hopedale Select Board meeting at 8:45 p.m.

Respectfully submitted:
Kelly Grant, Executive Assistant

Select Board approved: 12/26/2023