

News Brief
Bridgewater
December 2023

Over the past several months the Selectboard has been informing town citizens of the effort to withdraw from the Newfound School District and establishing a three-town school district. This is likely to be **the most important decision the town will make in the past half century.**

As we said in our previous newsletter, it **“will define the future of taxation and education quality in our Towns”**. If the vote fails, it is not an understatement to say the basic character of our town will change - the downstream effects of the school tax increases will, eventually, be **significant and irreversible**. We will not have the ability to stop the Newfound School District and/or other towns from increasing our taxes. Painful will be an understatement, our town’s will be fundamentally altered to cope with the imposed tax increase.

Due to the efforts of some of the citizens from Hebron, Groton, and Bridgewater lobbying for HB 349, we have a **one-time opportunity** to leave SAU4 and create our own district. This opportunity will not come again. A steering committee has been formed to make sure that creating our own district is not done at the expense of the children nor the professional staff. In fact, the committee believes that there is a path to improving the education for the children from our towns. A vote in favor of leaving SAU4 means keeping our taxes reasonable **AND** improving education for our children.

Will this cost more? Perhaps a little. Any tax increase will be far less than staying in the district. For more information or a refresher, see the following link: Ctrl &Click –

[Why we are withdrawing from SAU4](#)
(Appreciate pg. 5 of that document!!),

Bottom line to you, the voters..... On the second Tuesday of March 12 at 7:30 pm, (Hebron in May) there will be a vote on a warrant article to withdraw from the existing school district by Bridgewater, Hebron and Groton. It will allow those 3 towns to establish a new, smaller, and innovative cooperative school district. All three towns must vote “yes” or the article fails.

“Can we absentee vote?” No – State Law prohibits this matter being voted in that manner.

“Secret Ballot Vote?” Yes. After a short discussion period.

“Can we change the date?” No.

We realize that some of our residents are “snowbirds” or may not plan to be in town. We understand this timing is inconvenient. Again, this is one of the most critical votes our town has **EVER** faced. If we all look at our last tax bills - if this vote fails, multiply the amount by 2.5! That could be your tax bill within five years or sooner. If we do not vote to form our own district, our taxes will increase to reduce taxes in four other towns in SAU4. **This opportunity to withdraw cannot be repeated in the future. (This special legislation will expire if voted down).**

Our steering committee is in place to assure no harm, only benefit to our students or teachers. The new district will give you (citizens of Bridgewater) greater control of education and your tax dollars. All this is positive.

If you assume your neighbors will show up and vote the obvious, you are very, very mistaken. Get here by train, plane, or horseback. Just vote!

Progress to Date:

- We have held and will continue to hold information sessions to keep citizens in each of the 3 towns informed and allow them to provide input.
- Established a tailings/phase out agreement with the Newfound District. That means students currently in or going into middle and high school can complete their education at the Newfound schools if they so choose. We are eliminating disruption for kids and assuring a smooth transition.
- We are creating expanded options for parents. We have contacted SAU48 (Plymouth) about creating a High School option at Plymouth for our students. We have an agreement in principle and are working on the details.
- We are working with the bus company to map out routes and understand the costs.
- We are researching federal and state aid options about food service.
- We have contacted educational curriculum companies to whom BHVS is currently connected via SAU4.
- We have met with teachers twice to answer questions to understand their concerns.
- Created proposed tuition/financial agreements for Newfound (if they want a continued relationship). Our ideal scenario is to establish a school choice between Newfound and Plymouth High Schools.
- Drafted Articles of Agreement for the Towns of Bridgewater, Hebron, and Groton relative to new school district. This will be the governing document describing how our new district will work.

Looking forward:

- Solidify reciprocal tailings agreement with SAU4 (Newfound), so students currently at BHVS living outside Bridgewater, Hebron, and Groton may continue at our school.
- Determine arrangements for Pre-Kindergarten Students.
- Meet with Parents for questions and answers.
- Solidify all costs before the vote in March.
- Meet again in each of the towns to explain numbers.
- Send out mailing prior to the vote.

Playground Replacement/Upgrade. Bridgewater Hebron Village School (BHVS)

We have received a grant of \$182,000 from a private foundation for the replacement and upgrading of the existing school playground. The current structure is 23 years old and reaching the end of its life cycle. New regulations require a handicap design component. In addition, a new smaller playground for kindergarten and pre-school age children is being added in the rear of the building which will accommodate that age group. The total cost of the project is about \$220,000 when completed. We will be seeking additional funds from private individuals to close the funding gap.

The sense of generosity and philanthropy of this foundation is remarkable. They have assisted us, and other schools, hospitals and other charitable organizations in impacting the lives of others. They have helped make the world a better place. Thank you.

Other News: In Brief

Public Safety:

Police Division – As you may have observed, there is a greater police presence in Town. We approved the employment of a second officer (Part-time) to improve patrolling and general response time. Officer Johnson helps us control speeding and improve response time to emergencies. Police Chief George Huckins completed his EMT credentials and assists in health emergencies. Congratulations and thank you, George.

EMS Division. Give the demographics of the town (median age of 58), lots of activities in this area. We are in the process of obtaining a new ambulance. The Ford 550 chassis for the ambulance arrived late 2022. It is four wheel drive with a diesel engine. (Very

similar to our existing ambulance). Regrettably, the specifications by Ford were incorrect and we rejected that vehicle. Currently, we are on the list for a 2024 that meets specs.

Fire Division: We have seen an improvement in the number of new faces in that department. We are a very well equipped department and, like many towns, are finding it difficult to attract personnel in every division. Plenty of training in progress.

The old 2002 ambulance with about 50K miles on the vehicle will be modified for fire use to a multi-use rescue vehicle carrying multi tools and fire support equipment. The 2002 frame and engine are in excellent condition and will enhance that department capabilities. We have escrowed the approved funding for this purchase.

Highway: Lots of paving over existing surfaces this summer. In addition, we sold a 5 year old truck that was a very costly vehicle to support. We replaced it with a similar size truck with a proven emission system. The old truck repair costs, over a two year period, was about \$40,000 dollars! Most of that cost was due to the emission system. This past summer was very rainy!! We had a small flood event on Dick Brown road in late June-early July. We are currently working with FEMA for flood assistance.

Refuse District (AKA – Dump) Just as Covid-19 hit, we lease-purchased a pre-crusher compactor. This allows us to ship non recyclables in a more efficient manner. Prior to the purchase, we had 2 - 40 yard open top dumpsters for those items. We shipped 4-6 tons on each load. With the new machine, we ship 14-16 tons per shipment. Fewer trips substantially lowers costs. The total cost of the upgrade was about \$110,000. It is to be paid off this December of 2023. The 3 year note was mostly paid by reduced shipping costs.

We received a federal grant of \$36,000 to replace a well-used can compactor which was about 50 years old! The new equipment crushed/compacts steel and aluminum cans as well as light iron. It creates a 15 x 9 x 12 inch block. Those blocks are stacked on a pallet and the product is sold. We shipped out two trailer truck loads of bailed plastics, one of cardboard and many other items.

The staff wanted to thank a resident for the donation of a riding lawnmower to replace our, not so reliable, old mower. Thanks!!

Town Administration/Finance: Our finances continue in good shape. We are viewing 2024 with caution as the economic outlook is unclear. One element of concern is assessments. Another is the state wide education property tax issue.

State law requires townships to keep assessments at market value every five years. Our last reassessment was in 2020. That brought valuations to 100% of market value. By 2022, it had declined to 70% of value! **In 2023, our ratio of assessment of land and building is currently at 58%.** The good news is we all have increased equity in our homes. Bad news – it may increase your tax bill depending on market factors. Not all property assessments will increase at the same rate. Property valuations and the related tax bills are not a reflection of expenditures. That can exacerbate the problem. While the tax rate will decline, the problem is forecasting impacts.

Our most immediate concern is relative to the school withdrawal issue. It should be yours as well!

We want to acknowledge the efforts and skills of the town employees that make the Bridgewater community a special place to live.

Best wishes for a happy and relaxing holiday season.

Sincerely,

Terence Murphy
Selectmen

Maurice Jenness Jr.

P. Wesley Morrill Jr.