

West Tisbury Selectman's School Task Force

Final Report March, 2016

Acknowledgements

The West Tisbury Selectman's School Task Force extends its great appreciation to Bruce Stone, West Tisbury Town Accountant, for his time-consuming, thorough and comprehensive efforts to assist and respond to the requests of the Task Force for data, information and potential changes to the Regional Agreement creating the Up Island Regional School District (UIRSD). His assistance was invaluable and called upon in addition to his considerable responsibilities regarding the town's budget formulation process, which overlapped the time frame of the Task Force's deliberations.

Our thanks also to the Superintendent's office for its cooperation, also at budget time, providing data, and historic and current information regarding cost distributions in the UIRSD.

Background

The Up Island Regional School District comprised of the towns of Aquinnah, Chilmark, and West Tisbury came into existence on July 1, 1994. Its formation was the result of the confluence of several factors including regionalization incentives offered by the Commonwealth and growing enrollments which necessitated an addition to the West Tisbury School at that time. The Commonwealth offered to pay a substantial amount of the transportation costs of a regionalized District, and regionalization was one way for all three towns to contribute to the capital costs of an addition to the West Tisbury School.

Aquinnah at that time (and now) did not have its own school although Chilmark did. The Regionalization Agreement did not plan for or foresee that all the region's students would at some point be housed in the expanded West Tisbury School, and indeed, Chilmark has since built a new school building. Since the District's inception the two schools have both operated K-5 programs with separate administrations, curriculum and site budgets. The West Tisbury School also houses grades 6-8 for all three towns.

Within ten years of its formation the District's schools experienced a multi-year decline in enrollments, and the Commonwealth steadily reduced its transportation reimbursement rate to approximately 50% instead of the higher amount it paid initially. As a result the expanded capacity at the West Tisbury School (now largely in excess) made it possible, if not feasible, to close the Chilmark School, house all the District's students in West Tisbury and provide an operational cost savings to the taxpayers of all three towns. 1

1 In recent years enrollments have stabilized. The K-5 enrollment in the Chilmark School is currently 49, and the K-8 enrollment in the West Tisbury School is 318. These enrollments include 47 School Choice students in West Tisbury and 7 in Chilmark. The inclusive cost of the Chilmark School in the proposed 2017 budget is close to \$1.5 M. The capacity of the West Tisbury School is approximately 400.

However, resistance to any suggestion that the Chilmark School be closed, and its students all transferred to the West Tisbury School, was vehement.

There were some voices from the start, mostly in West Tisbury, that claimed the Chilmark School was redundant, and in a more cost-conscious environment, should be closed. These voices became louder as enrollments fell year after year, and District costs continued to escalate. It was during this time that Chilmark built a new school building. The five-member District school committee bowed to the resistance in Chilmark by not closing its school.²

There were several failed attempts on the town meeting floor in West Tisbury to withdraw West Tisbury from the District. However when the question was posed as a non-binding ballot question it passed. Two external studies by consultants were commissioned – one by the town of West Tisbury, the other by the West Tisbury Finance Committee – to determine the financial implications of a withdrawal from the District by West Tisbury. These studies, completed approximately ten years ago, came to conflicting conclusions.³

There the issue has remained unresolved and has simmered for a decade.

Sharply increasing District costs in recent years have come to the forefront of the West Tisbury Finance Committee, the Board of Selectmen, and West Tisbury's taxpayers. The recurrent claim that West Tisbury (and Aquinnah) taxpayers pay an unnecessary premium because of the existence of the Chilmark School has once again raised the issue of whether West Tisbury should remain in the District or if some other measures could be taken to offset the cost of the Chilmark School to the other two towns.

² The five-member District school committee is elected at-large every four years, and its composition is determined by the regional agreement: each town is guaranteed one seat, and the remaining two seats are determined at large. In practice, except for the first four years when Chilmark had two seats, West Tisbury has always had three seats, a majority, on the school committee.

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The 2006 Abrams study determined that withdrawal could actually increase West Tisbury's costs. The 2007 Harkins study determined West Tisbury could "potentially" save approximately \$922,000 if the Chilmark School was closed. An additional internal study over ten years ago by the Superintendent's office determined that closing the Chilmark School, at that time, would save the District approximately \$750,000 annually.

The Task Force

In late summer 2015 the West Tisbury Board of Selectmen moved to create a new seven-member Task Force to address the issue of an unfair distribution of costs in the UIRSD, and what might potentially be done about them.² The Task Force membership was to consist of one West Tisbury selectman, two members of the West Tisbury Finance Committee, two members of the UIRSD committee, and two members at-large from West Tisbury.

The charge by the Selectmen to the Task Force is:

- 1) Elect chair, vice-chair, and secretary.
- 2) Conduct a comprehensive review of the advantages and disadvantages of West Tisbury's continuing participation in the UIRSD.
- 3) Consult with the School Superintendent and such other resources as the committee deems appropriate to address economic/funding, transportation, educational issues, as they pertain to #2 above.
- 4) To hold at least one public forum to discuss the preliminary findings of the committee.
- 5) Prepare a final report to the Board of Selectmen regarding the findings of the committee, with such recommendations as the committee may wish to make.
- 6) To conclude its work prior to January 15, 2016, if possible.

The members are:

Richard Knabel –	Selectman
Gary Montrowl –	Finance Committee
Greg Orcutt –	Finance Committee
Michael Marcus –	School Committee (West Tisbury)
Robert Lionette –	School Committee Chair (Chilmark)
Susan Silk –	At large
Wenonah Madison –	At large

Richard Knabel and Susan Silk served as co-chairs of the Task Force. Susan Silk also served as secretary. Three members (Marcus, Lionette, and Madison) have school-aged children in the district.

The Task Force met eight times: Oct. 8, 22, Nov. 5, and Dec. 3, 2015; Jan. 7, 14, 28, March 28, 2016. With the exception of the Oct. 8 and March 28th meeting, all meetings were recorded and broadcast by MVTV.

In its review of the history of the District, and the concerns about costs, cost distribution, and the existence of the Chilmark School, the Task Force decided that the following assumptions would be taken as given:

- 1) That the Chilmark School's existence would continue until such a time as Chilmark decided otherwise, i.e., that the UIRSD committee would not move to close it although it is empowered to do so.
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2) That parents in West Tisbury and Chilmark would not easily consent to having their children involuntarily transferred from one school to the other.

The most significant questions that the Task Force considered were:

1- How have the UIRSD budget and assessments changed over the past two years?

At the onset, Bruce Stone, at the direction of the Task Force, did an analysis of the UIRSD assessment budgets for the two-year period from FY 2014 to FY 2016 to see what factors were driving recent budget increases and, in particular, the increase in West Tisbury's assessments.

The components of the assessment budget that were driving the overall increases were identified as:

- The District's share of the Superintendent's Shared Services budget, up 38.4% (a significant increase in shared special education programs)
- The School Committee (District wide services including a new secretary, the enhanced meal program and residential placements) up 25.4%; and,
- Charter School "sending" tuition assessed to the District by the Commonwealth up 18.7%.

Superintendent's Shared Services:

While analyzing the cause of the Superintendent's Shared Services allocation to the UIRSD increase of 38.4 % (a rate higher than the actual Superintendent's overall budget increase) it became apparent that the Task Force needed also to study the impact of school choice students on that budget's allocation to the K-8 districts to the detriment of the UIRSD (where the net difference in school choice students has been increasing rapidly from year to year).

The two-year comparison also indicated that the percentage share of students from West Tisbury within the District had increased causing West Tisbury percentage in the UIRSD assessment formulas to increase. This resulted in West Tisbury's assessment to increase by 17.1% in the two-year period while the overall total assessment increase was only 10.4%.

2-How does the UIRSD budget compare to the other island K-8 districts?

The second significant task Bruce Stone undertook at the direction of the Task Force was to compare the UIRSD site budgets for the Chilmark and West Tisbury schools to the other K-8 districts on the island.

The most profound aspect was the comparison of the staffing of the UIRSD sites to the other districts, especially when looked at in conjunction with the number of students within each district. The UIRSD had 90 (full time equivalent) FTE's for 351 students according to the 10/1/2014 student census; Edgartown, Oak Bluffs and Tisbury had 79 FTE's for 351 students, 75 FTE's for 398 students and 75 FTE's for 324 students, respectively.

The higher staffing levels result in a significantly higher amount of per student cost. It also showed that much of the higher levels of staffing were in administrative, facilities and specialists where duplicative functions had to be provided at multiple sites.

3 -How much additional cost is the UIRSD bearing because of the Chilmark School and how is that additional cost shared in the town assessments?

The Task Force, based on data provided and anecdotal evidence, concluded that there is a cost to providing duplicative services caused by maintaining two school sites. Mr. Stone was asked to determine the total costs added to the UIRSD due to the duplication of services occurring in the operation of the Chilmark School.

While the actual additional costs cannot be exactly measured without a more thorough analysis of the specific educational needs of the individual children at the Chilmark School, a range of cost savings between a minimum and a maximum can be readily determined.

To determine the maximum savings Mr. Stone based his research on the assumption that all the children could be accommodated at the West Tisbury School without any additional staff needed to be added at the West Tisbury School.

To determine the minimum savings Mr. Stone based his research on the assumption that only administrative, support and facility staff could be eliminated and that all the direct educational staff would still be needed. In both assumptions, all facility related costs are eliminated.

The additional costs being caused by the Chilmark School include Part C of the assessments for the Chilmark Site and Part D for the Chilmark School capital costs, but also would include some costs within Part B for the School Committee because that is where food service staff and employee benefits for Medicare tax, unemployment insurance, workers compensation insurance and non-teacher retirement contributions are budgeted.⁴

Using Draft #6 of the proposed FY2017 UIRSD budget (the latest available) it is calculated that the operation of the Chilmark School is costing the District a minimum of \$659,619 and a maximum of \$1,489,738. While Chilmark does pay the largest assessed share of these costs, a significant portion of these additional costs are assessed to the towns of Aquinnah and West Tisbury.

In the minimum cost scenario, Aquinnah and West Tisbury's shares are \$108,915 and \$136,048, respectively. In the maximum cost scenario the towns of Aquinnah and West Tisbury expenditures are \$257,344 and \$302,061 respectively. It must be noted that the additional cost borne by Chilmark in the minimum and maximum scenarios are \$450,657 and \$930,333, respectively.

Mr. Stone informed the Task Force that the actual amount of additional cost is most likely closer to the maximum than the minimum level.

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Part C consists of the site budgets for the direct services provided at each of the Chilmark and West Tisbury school sites. Part D is the capital and debt costs attributable to each school site. The host town of each site is assessed 80% of this cost and the remaining 20% is divided between the other two towns based on their combined enrollment. Part B is the cost of services provided by the UIRSD centrally for the entire District. All calculations are based on the school census conducted on Oct. 1 of the fiscal year preceding the fiscal year for which the assessment is being determined.

4 – Additional Questions that Emerged

The Task Force asked Mr. Stone to analyze per student costs within the District.

Mr. Stone created an estimate of the costs of K-5 vs Grades 6-8 within the District but the results failed to provide very useful data for the goal at hand. However, the data does demonstrate that the per-student costs of Grades 6-8 were astronomical driven greatly by what has been called the “bubble” class - a grade year with very few students that is working its way through the District. This “bubble class” is currently at Grade 7 with only 20 students -- less than half a typical grade size.

The Task Force also asked Mr. Stone to determine the cost of educating just West Tisbury students at the West Tisbury School.

Based on a discussion with West Tisbury Principal Donna Lowell Bettencourt it was determined that this data would not produce very useful results. The number of West Tisbury students alone would probably not result in a significant decreasing in staffing at the West Tisbury School as the number of classes needed at most grade levels would be the same - most grades with two classes would still need to be two classes. Some reduction in specialists would probably be realized but that would involve a more close review of the individual needs of students currently receiving services, and whether or not they are West Tisbury residents.

The Recommendation Options:

After considerable discussion the Task Force agreed to the following four options as possible recommendations to the Board of Selectmen:

1. Leave the Regional Agreement just as it is, i.e., take no action.

This option was rejected as there clearly is discomfort with the current cost distribution formulas and has been for some time.

2. West Tisbury should withdraw from the District.

The Task Force view is that withdrawal always remains an option, perhaps as a last resort, but that other remedies should be pursued first.

In addition the Task Force felt it was unable, for lack of staff, budget, and time, to address all aspects of the complexities, legal, financial, and political, presented by an attempted withdrawal.

There are, however, Advantages and Disadvantages to remaining in the District:

Advantages:

- a) Continued receipt of Commonwealth of Massachusetts revenue to partially offset transportation costs.

- b) Administrative costs for managing payroll, personnel, purchasing, facilities management, etc., assumed by the District and/or the Superintendent's office. All these administrative functions would otherwise have to be assumed by the town with attendant staffing and budget implications.
- c) More flexibility and mobility of students within the District as provided for by school committee policy.
- d) Cost of building operation and grounds maintenance assumed by the District, and thus shared by all three towns.

Disadvantages:

- a) Currently West Tisbury's share of the UIRSD budget comes to the town as an assessment. Line items in the District budget are not subject to debate or amendment on town meeting floor, as are other areas of the overall town budget.
- b) Continued loss of control over budget, and policy decisions. Withdrawal from the District would require West Tisbury to reestablish an elected school committee, presumably of either three or five members. This school committee would prepare an annual budget, which would be subject to a line-by-line amendment at town meeting.

3. Revise the Regional Agreement to shift more of the Chilmark School costs to Chilmark.

As a result of the research conducted by Mr. Stone the Task Force was able to analyze the UIRSD budgets, past and proposed, as well as staffing comparisons with the down-Island schools. The redundancy amounts attributable to having two schools rather than one are identified earlier in this report.

4. Commission a new funded external study to examine the complexities and implications for West Tisbury exiting the District.

The Task Force members agreed that it is unable, for lack of staff, budget, time and expertise to address all aspects of the complexities – legal, financial and political -- presented by an attempted withdrawal.

Next Steps: Recommendation Option #3

The Task Force members concluded that initially Recommendation Option #3 (Revise the Regional Agreement to shift more of the Chilmark School costs to Chilmark) was the most tenable.

Therefore, the Task Force recommends that a dialogue be initiated between the three towns, perhaps under the auspices of the Superintendent, to revise the Regional Agreement with respect to the distribution of the District's operational costs, specifically such that Chilmark would, over some time period, assume a greater share, or perhaps all, of its school's costs.

As was stated earlier in this document, the Task Force view is that withdrawal from the UIRSD always remains an option, perhaps as a last resort, but that other remedies should be pursued first. Therefore Recommendation Option #4 (Commission a new funded external study to examine the complexities and implications for West Tisbury exiting the District) should be considered at such

time as negotiations to resolve the inequity of the District's operational costs fail to achieve the desired results.

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We, the undersigned members of the West Tisbury Selectman's School Task Force, having read this document, acknowledge that it is a true reflection of the process, findings, conclusions and recommendations coming forth from this assignment.

Signature

Richard Knabel, co-chair

Susan Silk, co-chair/secretary

Robert Lionette

Wenonah Madison

Michael Marcus

Gary Montrowl

Greg Orcutt