

MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL MEETING  
OF THE RIVENDELL INTERSTATE SCHOOL DISTRICT  
Held on March 21, 2023

The Annual Meeting was held in the gymnasium of Rivendell Academy in Orford, NH. Voters of Orford, NH, Fairlee, West Fairlee and Vershire, VT met for the purpose of holding the Annual District Meeting of the Rivendell Interstate School district pursuant to Article IV.G of the New Hampshire-Vermont Interstate School Compact. Approximately 246 voters attended the Annual Meeting.

David Hooke, Moderator of the Rivendell Interstate School District, called the meeting to order at 6:30 p.m. Mr. Hooke asked that those present stand for the Pledge of Allegiance. Mr. Hooke read the Warrant, reviewed the meeting and voting procedures, Robert's Rules, and stated that the polls were opened at 6:00 p.m. and would remain open for one-half hour following the completion of business under the other articles. Mr. Hooke thanked all for their attendance and explained this is the first in-person meeting since 2019. Mr. Hooke asked if there were any members of the press attending the meeting – Alex Nuti-de-Biasi - Journal Opinion, were recognized.

**Article 3: To hear reports from the School Board and others relating to the construction/renovation, educational, and financial issues facing the District.**

Kathy Hooke, Chair led a round of Board and administration introductions. She recognized the staff of the District and thanked them for their service. She also spoke to the process of returning to democracy in action and shared appreciation for all in attendance.

**Article 4: Shall the voters of the District raise and appropriate the sum of \$14,748,296 for the operating budget for the District for the 2023-2024 fiscal year?**

The article was moved and seconded. Hooke shared a PowerPoint presentation that outlined how this level-staffed budget meets the educational needs of our students with no reduction in staff, and that, 1) support families and students, 2) maintains enrichment curriculum, 3) supports project-based learning, 4) provides social emotional learning, and 5) academic support. She spoke of student achievements and activities which represent the many ways our teachers go above and beyond.

Bruce Lyndes (Fairlee) spoke about the budget being bloated and asked for clarification about the details of the current union contracts. Nate Thames responded that the Board engaged in negotiations with both units with a settled increase of 10% for support staff in FY'23 and FY'24 and a 7% increase in FY'23 and 8% increase for FY'24 for teachers over the previous year's salary. Lyndes asked how many members of the board are teachers and stated there needs to be a compromise between the wants of the teachers and the public's ability to pay. Jason Knowles responded that we started behind in teacher's salaries and the District needs to be competitive with other districts to attract new skilled teachers. Hooke added we need to match the inflation rate in order to give teachers an actual cost-of-living increase and that the teacher pay scale is still pretty low. Teachers are leaving the profession in droves, and it is the fair thing to do for our teachers and students. Lyndes further commented on the declining enrollment. Mark Blanchard (Orford) stated that we are a rural, small population which costs more for education, but there are many good things to attract individuals to this area and emphasized the importance of maintaining a good environment for our students. Another individual added that we need to consider what we want for the future for our students and not the taxes. Cathy Eastburn (Orford) spoke about decreasing graduation rates, the high rate of disciplinary referrals, and the lack of some academic offerings. She felt that teachers should be paid, but it is too much to do it in one or two years. Sandra-Smith Ordway (Fairlee) voiced concerns about the budget and stated that it comes to a point where people cannot afford it. She spoke about student/staff ratios and while not disputing that teachers deserve a fair pay said the concentration needs to be on how we are staffing to improve those ratios. Ordway also asked about the high number of homeschooled students. Hooke said we need to do a better job at connecting with our homeschool families, but feels the increased number may be a result of the pandemic. Hooke added that multiage classrooms have been discussed and the Board needs to be thinking long-term and intentionally about this and other possible grade configurations. She said strategic planning is a high priority for the Board. Ben Hooke (Vershire), Rivendell student, stated that Rivendell teachers are really, really good and that they are not just showing up for a paycheck. He added their work is not easy and challenging. Charles Smith, Jr. (Orford) asked if the Board has worked with each town's planning board/selectboard on a plan with the school board. He also was concerned about the school report card showing data that Rivendell is well below state average in math and English language arts. Smith stated the District should be proactive and looking for efficient alternatives to save on utilities, such as solar farms. Hooke responded that Honeywell did a full assessment of our schools and produced a proposal that could include solar panels, among other things. While the

Board decided against the program at the time, it is still on the table for discussion. She added that historically, Rivendell students have outperformed state averages and outperformed other schools with similar demographic profiles and while the performance numbers are concerning, they are not surprising during these turbulent times. David Ricker added that our numbers are so small the numbers can fluctuate wildly. Debra Kingsbury (Vershire) applauded the accomplishments of the school, but is very concerned about the increased budget. She stated that we have the same number of staff and teachers we had when the enrollment was over five hundred students and that we have to keep the taxes somewhat stabilized. She asked the Board to do more planning and come back with an improved, lesser number. Kingsbury also inquired about the surplus from last year. Hooke stated the surplus was not represented anywhere because the Board is waiting for the external audit and is working with the local elected auditors for how to appropriate it. Regardless, it will come back to the taxpayers and the Board will address it between now and June. The estimated surplus is approximately \$600,000 and is definitely enough to cover the additionally warned articles. Hooke mentioned that debt service is just at the point of being retired and a different calculation rate for equalized pupils for the Vermont towns is scheduled to begin next year. Michael Galli (Fairlee) congratulated the Board for giving learning coaches a pay raise adding they have been grossly underpaid and work with the most challenging students in the District. He spoke of the impact of COVID on educating students and the interventions necessary to get them caught up. Galli spoke of the tie between special education costs and learning coaches, which is a cost you cannot mitigate. Keri Gelenian added that learning coaches do a tremendous job and provide interventions in the classroom to make it possible for teachers to teach everyone equitably in the same room and it is what makes Rivendell special. John Durgin (Fairlee) stated no one would argue teachers do not work hard and deserve to be paid what they are worth, but the budget needs to be reduced and it is not sustainable. He added that student enrollment is declining, but staffing remains the same. Durgin asked about the Board's long-range plan to keep the district unified as it stands now. Hooke responded the budget is all about people and if we want to make cuts that result in meaningful breaks in taxes, we are looking at cutting lots and lots of teachers. This would impact our students in an uneven manner. She fully agreed that the Board needs to be working on strategic planning. Cassia Kriezis (Orford) stated the District has good intentions and she has great respect for all educators, but it is not enough. Barb Griffin (Vershire) feels passionate about the budget and encouraged voters to vote yes. She stated that when comparing this budget to the 2021 budget the Vershire tax rate is almost identical. Students are getting a good education and she thanked the Board for their work. Sean Cram (Vershire) stated that the school district was one of the deciding factors to move his family here and it is what keeps them here. We are making an investment in our future with our children. Mark Blanchard (Orford) said there is a lot to be credited to the way Rivendell got started, and that some of the reason why we have not progressed on things like solar or other ways to reduce overhead costs is because these non-classroom items were perceived by many of the public as spending money that was not on the classroom and, therefore, shouldn't be spent.

The question was called, seconded, and passed by voice vote.

Kingsbury asked for a paper ballot for the budget vote. This was moved and seconded by more than seven voters.

Total votes cast were 246, 134 voted yes, 111 voted no and 1 spoiled. Article passed.

**Article 5: Shall the voters of the District authorize the School Board raise and appropriate the sum of \$50,000 to be placed in the Repairs and Maintenance Contingency Reserve?** The article was moved and seconded. Bonnie Strout (Vershire) asked if it were necessary to raise this money or could the surplus be applied to these separate articles. Hooke stated this would have needed to be specifically worded in the warrant articles. James Bourn said allocation of these funds is intended for unforeseen issues, such as boiler replacement, repairing old HVAC equipment, etc.

The moderator asked if the voters were ready for the question. Article passed by voice vote.

**Article 6: Shall the voters of the District raise and appropriate the sum of \$50,000 to be placed in the Repairs and Maintenance Contingency Reserve for the purpose of repairing a section of the Academy roof?** The article was moved and seconded. It was asked if this is the same article that was passed last year for roof repairs. Bourn explained the intended purpose of this article is for roof repair over the Expedition Classroom section of the building.

The moderator asked if the voters were ready for the question. Article passed by voice vote.

**Article 7: Shall the voters of the District raise and appropriate the sum of \$60,000 to be placed in the Repairs and Maintenance Contingency Reserve for the purpose of required Americans with Disabilities (ADA) upgrades at the Academy?** The article was moved and seconded. There was conversation about what upgrades are required. Bourn said an independent assessment of the Academy was completed and we were found ADA compliant, however it was discovered some upgrades are necessary to help facilitate ease of use for all students, so all students are able to move around freely. Brian Stoudnour (Fairlee) stated these are changes that are necessary to make the building accessible to all people.

The moderator asked if the voters were ready for the question. Article passed by voice vote.

**Article 8: Shall the voters of the District raise and appropriate the sum of \$40,000 to be placed in the Repairs and Maintenance Contingency Reserve for the purpose of security upgrades and new installations at all schools?** The article was moved and seconded. Bourn explained the purpose of these funds is to support mitigation upgrades to help ensure our buildings are safer for students and staff, including cameras at the elementary schools and key fob access to doors.

The moderator asked if the voters were ready for the question. Article passed by voice vote.

**Article 9: Shall the voters of the District raise and appropriate the sum of \$44,000 to be placed in the Repairs and Contingency Reserve for upgrades to theater lighting equipment and installation at the Academy in order to obtain a matching grant?** The article was moved and seconded. Shay Perry (Orford) asked if this article needed to pass in order to get the matching grant. The grant amount has been predetermined. Ben Hooke (Vershire) is a member of theater and stated that students care a lot about it and the current lighting is really bad. Cami Buster (Fairlee) has been working with the theater group for twenty-two years and said this will provide a better experience for the students.

The moderator asked if the voters were ready for the question. Article passed by voice vote.

**Article 10: Shall the voters of the District authorize the School Board to apply for, accept, and expend, without further action by the voters of the District, all money from any governmental or private sources which becomes available during the 2023-2024 fiscal year for their intended use?** The article was moved and seconded. Sandra Ordway-Smith (Fairlee) asked for an annual report of what the District applies for and receives from governmental or private sources.

The moderator asked if the voters were ready for the question. Article passed by voice vote.

**Article 11: To transact any other business which may lawfully properly come before the meeting.** Mark Blanchard (Orford) encouraged the Board to look into charitable organizations to raise tax deductible gifts to the schools. Jean Dyke (Orford) who manages the greenhouse at the Academy reported receiving a \$500.00 grant from the Lion's Club for the greenhouse. D. Hooke shared a message of thanks from the board members for all of the school bus drivers for their service.

Motion made and seconded to adjourn the meeting. The motion passed by voice vote.  
The meeting adjourned at 9:18 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Brenda Gray  
District Clerk, RISD  
March 24, 2023

Annual Meeting, March 21, 2023

Ballots were officially counted and tallied as below:

**Fairlee Board Member (3-year):**

**David Gagner – 48**

Write in candidates (2), Blank (2)

Total Ballots – 52

**Orford Board Member (3-year):**

**David W. Ricker – 54**

**Charles Smith, Jr. – 44**

Write in candidates (1), Void (1), Spoiled (3)

Total Ballots – 103

**Vershire Board Member (3-year):**

**Kathy Hooke – 45**

Write in candidates (2), Blank (1), Spoiled (2)

Total Ballots – 50

**For At-Large Board Member, 1-year term:**

**Sara E. Day – 196**

Write in candidates (8), Blank (21)

Total Ballots – 225

**For Moderator, 1-Year Term:**

**David Hooke – 208**

Write in candidates (3), Blank (14)

Total Ballots – 225

**For District Clerk, 1 Year Term:**

Write in candidates (22), Blank (203)

Total Ballots – 225

*Registered voters in the District – 2640*

*Write in candidate needs 1% to win election –no write in received the percentage required – no one was elected.*

**For Treasurer, 1-Year Term:**

**Jonathan Sands - 193**

Write in candidates (4), Blank (28)

Total Ballots – 225

**For Auditor, 3-Year Term:**

**Lillian G. Gahagan – 195**

Write in candidates (1), Blank (29)

Total Ballots – 225

All ballots and exit checklists are sealed and on file per request of the District Clerk at the Fairlee Town Clerk's Office, Fairlee, VT.