# **BEST Transportation Sub-Committee Report**

Members of the Tranpostation Subcommittee: David Newell, (Ashfield, Chair); Robin Pease (Mohawk, Secretary); Charles Stetson (Rowe); Heather Davis (Plainfield); Julia Aaron (Charlemont); Erwin Reynolds (Charlemont).

# **Purpose**

In order to attain an improved financial 'sustainability' for the Mohawk Trail Regional School District, the Subcommittee sought ways to contain transportation cost for both the short-term (FY 17-19) and long-term (FY 20 et seq.) and to otherwise reduce the net cost to the member towns for school transportation. A number of general proposals were directed to the Subcommittee for consideration, as well as specific questions relating to various restructuring options.

# **Background**

Mohawk's transportation system covers around 250 square miles in nine towns – the geographically largest academic regional school system in the Commonwealth. Currently, Mohawk utilizes 15 buses, 3 mini-buses, and 6 vans (including 3 transporting to vocational schools). Mohawk presently contracts for transportation services and is now in year 3 of a five year contract that will expire in June 2019. Mohawk's FY 17 transportation budget is \$1,183,021 (roughly 6+% of total budget). In recent years the Commonwealth has reimbursed Mohawk and other districts for slightly over half of total transportation expense. For example, in FY 16, Mohawk received \$708,257 from the state against a FY 15 year budget of \$1,237,814 – roughly 57%. Thus, in order to reduce one dollar of transportation expense assessed to the towns, Mohawk would need to reduce transportation expense by \$2.33, more or less.

The Subcommittee carefully studied the current two-tier system serving Mohawk and its four elementary schools. Over the past 20 years or so, routes have been reduced, and truncated resulting in more students walking to/from bus stops. There is currently a one hour differential between the high school and elementary schools, and some buses have difficulty executing routes within this time limit. Simply put, the current system is about as 'tight' as can be logistically arranged.

### **Recommendation on Route Reductions**

The best way to contain expense is to reduce the number of routes and vehicles serving Mohawk. We carefully studied route consolidations, particularly in the Colrain/Shelburne and Ashfield/Plainfield areas and determined that, while one (and perhaps two) consolidations were logistically possible, they were not desirable or practical. They would require increasing the Mohawk/Elementary time differential, and require some additional pickup location consolidations (with increased walking). The Subcommittee recommends that further route reductions not be considered as these reductions in service would be contradictory to the larger aims and goals established by Mohawk's BEST.

# **Proposals evaluated**

- PARENT TRANSPORTATION ARRANGEMENTS. 'Parent Arranged Transportation'
  (PAT's) can sometimes help contain costs, and have been utilized in instances where
  there is a single child/family involved. Utilizing parents to transport other students
  is unwise and highly problematic. The Subcommittee recommends that any
  transportation system arrangement that <u>relies</u> on PAT's not be considered.
- 2. ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ASSIGNMENTS BASED ON GEOGRAPY. It had been proposed that school assignments based on geographic propinquity rather than town lines might save busing expense. After careful study, we found no such economies would be attained, as total vehicular needs would not be changed, and total mileage/time involved would not be significantly reduced. The only geographic area that seemed to have some potential savings was the East Hawley area reassigned to Sanderson, but upon examination, the savings were minimal to none, and there were legal impediments as two school districts would be involved. The Subcommittee recommends that 'geographic reassignment' not be considered for these economic reasons.
- 3. BUS STOP 'CLUSTERING'. The Subcommittee studied a proposal calling for fewer bus stops in order to streamline the routes and reduce route times. We found no economic benefit would result from bus stop 'clustering'. For this reason and because such a plan would result in more students walking (and/or walking further), we recommend that it not be implemented.

### Recommendation Relating to Establishing a 'Municipal Bus Operation'

The Subcommittee believes that transportation cost could be reduced if the district owned (or leased) and operated a fleet of vehicles, and managed busing services municipally rather than contract for these services. While there are many potential economic benefits to a 'municipal model', we are also aware that there will be some downsides, including costs associated with insurance and retirement benefits that will increase with the addition of around 25 to 27 municipal employees.

We recommend that the Mohawk school committee and administration undertake a thorough study of the economic and other benefits that would be attained were the district to establish a 'municipal system' for transportation. We have a number of related recommendations and observations which we will share with the School Committee should they elect to undertake such a study. The study should be completed by December 2017 so that the district will have ample time to implement such a plan if it opts to go forward.

## **Recommendations Relating to Future Transportation Contracting**

Starting in September 2019, Mohawk will either be operating a municipal system, or will be starting another year of contracted transportation service with a private enterprise. Because Mohawk received only a single bid in 2013 for our current five-year contract, we communicated with all firms who attended the bidders' conference that year to learn why they did not bid, and how the district could modify its specifications to encourage more bidders and contain cost. These findings will be shared with the Mohawk committee. In the event Mohawk elects to continue with contracted services, we have prepared suggestions relating to changes in specifications that we believe will help contain transportation costs.

## **Recommendations Relating to Fuel**

If Mohawk opts to continue with contracted transportation services, we recommend that the district assume responsibility for the purchase of fuel, both diesel and unleaded. One benefit will be the savings in federal excise which Mohawk is exempt from, while the contractors are not. Currently diesel excise is at 24.4 cents/gallon (unleaded at 18.4). Last year, 38,000 gallons of diesel were used to execute the Mohawk bus contract. We estimate the excise tax savings at around \$10,000/year. The greater benefit we see is that, if Mohawk assumes responsibility for the most 'variable' economic factor in preparing a bid for transportation, the contractor will be in a much better position to 'sharpen his/her pencil' in preparing such a bid. And it may encourage more firms to consider bidding. Obviously most of these benefits will be realized should Mohawk opt to establish a 'municipal system'.

We continue to look at this option as both a short-term and long-term option. In either case, we recommend that we rely on the contractor to furnish the fuel depot (tanks, pumps, etc.). Even if Mohawk opts for a 'municipal system', we believe it would be wise to utilize a leased 'fuel depot' rather than construct a municipal 'fuel depot', at least initially. We believe that, if a 'municipal system' is proven to be advantageous, then the construction of a maintenance facility with a 'fuel depot' could be considered – possibly sited on the 7 acre property Mohawk acquired circa 1980 to the north and east of the campus.

# **Restructuring Options**

Other BEST subcommittees asked for guidance on certain models:

1. CONSOLIDATION OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS TO BSE AND SANDERSON. That would obviously require that current Colrain students likely be bused to BSE. Our Subcommittee determined that this is logistically possible. At issue would be the likely need to increase the 'time differential' (Mohawk/Elementary) by about 15 minutes. If this does not prove acceptable, the 'problem' could be resolved by adding one single-tier bus for BSE only service.

- 2. HEATH SCHOOL CLOSURE. We assume that Heath students would be bused en bloc to either Hawlemont or Rowe. We believe that busing Heath students to Rowe could be accomplished without any 'difficulties'. It is likely that the busing of Heath students to Hawlemont might result in a need to widen the 'time differential' between Mohawk and Hawlemont. If that proved unacceptable, the 'problem' could be solved by the addition of a single-tier bus.
- 3. SINGLE ELEMENTARY CAMPUS. We have not given consideration to matters relating to transportation for this option at this time because it has yet to be sufficiently defined and modeled.

### **NEXT STEPS**

- A more careful review of proposals affecting state reimbursements. We are particularly interested in a 'save harmless' clause in regional transportation reimbursement.
- Completion of discussions with the current contractor regarding possible contract revisions (FY 17-19).
- Continued examination of the possible benefits of a 'municipal system' and preparation of a report relating to the proposed study of this option.
- Ongoing review of specifications in the event Mohawk opts for continuing securing services by contracting.