

Connecticut General Assembly
Education Committee
Legislative Office Building, Room 3100
Hartford, CT 06106

Respected Members of the Education Committee,

My name is Janet Buonaiuto from Washington, CT and I am in opposition to HB 5304, the construction of a Vo-Ag Center at Shepaug Valley High School. I am one of many residents of Region 12 who continue to question the projected enrollment, the stated financials and the long-term viability of this project.

Concerning Enrollment:

If built, the Shepaug Ag/STEM Academy would be the third Vo-Ag center in southern Litchfield County, with Region 14 and Region 6 all within a 10 mile radius and all being adjoining towns. While it is stated that Region 14 must turn away a number of qualified students each year, our inquiries have found that Region 6 in Litchfield has room for many students in their program. Given the financial climate in Connecticut, it would make good sense to re-apportion some of Region 14's catchment towns to Ag/Science Centers that have openings available, such as Region 6.

Obviously, as a decision making body, the Education Committee is concerned with enrollment projections. Region 12's application for this project states a 240 student enrollment projection. This is extremely optimistic. I have taken the time to query all six of our proposed catchment towns and their present enrollment in Region 14's Ag/Science program is as follows with phone numbers provided for verification:

Brookfield	6 students	203 775-7700
Danbury	10 students	203 797-4724
New Fairfield	7 students	203 312-5770
New Milford	22 students	860 355-8406
Newtown	8 students	203 426-7600
Sherman	1 student	860 355-3793

This represents a total of 54 out-of-region students for all four grades. If you add to that the total of 7 students presently attending Region 14 from Region 12 it amounts to 61 students. Granted we should be able to add the number of qualified, wait-listed students from our six proposed catchment towns but these numbers frankly beg the question "Is this project truly worthy of an almost \$40 million dollar investment using both state and locally bonded funds?"

As of February 22, 2016 our Superintendent and Board of Education have not complied with two of the Conditions that were required for final approval of this project. Please see the attached e-mail from Deputy Commissioner of Education, Ellen Cohn, regarding this matter.

These conditions were placed on the application on August 4, 2015. Specifically concerning future enrollment, Condition #2 requires that: Regional School District 12 obtains agreements

from sending towns' local boards of education, signed by the town and the local board of education, expressing they are willing to increase the number of students they send to Regional School District 12 above their 3- year average they currently support at Regional School District 14: (subsection (b) of Connecticut General Statute 10-65).

It is hard to understand why this project has been placed on the Priority List without being denoted "* Pending additional support by the district" as six other projects have been noted as such. I would hope that this omission would be corrected before it leaves this committee.

Concerning the Financial Projections and Long-Term Viability:

This program was sold to the public with the idea that it would be self funding and there would even be monies left over from tuitions to pay off our borrowed debt and help pay for necessary repairs and upgrades to our aging Middle-High School. These financial projections are simply unrealistic as the current cost to educate in Region 12 is in excess of \$25,000 per student and the incoming tuitions per out of region students is \$10,023. I understand it is not in the purview of this body to delve into local finances but your vote should be tempered by the possible financial failure of this endeavor.

This project was conceived, not for any enduring interest in agriculture or vocational training but rather to stem the tide of declining enrollment. Indeed, in the early 1970's, when the new Shepaug Middle / High School opened it's doors, it was equipped with automotive, wood and metal shops and home economics classrooms. Connecticut education grants were used to partially fund these programs. Through the years, our Administration and Board of Education voted to disband all of those areas of study to focus primarily on a College Prep curriculum. Now in 2016 we want to go back to the future and are applying for over \$29 million in state grants to re-constitute these previously abandoned programs. Plans also include a 67,000 square foot addition to our very under utilized facility, including a 23,500 square foot indoor riding arena. All to increase Region 12's declining student population at a time of declining numbers in all but one of our proposed catchment towns.

I understand that there is support in the Connecticut Legislature to establish the state's 20th Ag/Science Center. I am asking you to consider carefully the location of this proposed center and the present enrollment figures. It does little to provide access to Ag/Science needs in far western Connecticut due to long bus routes and hardships placed on families whose children attend a program thirty miles from home.

I respectfully ask this committee to vote NO on HB 5304.

Janet Buonaiuto
Washington, CT