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February 17, 2016

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

To the Members of the Education Committee:

I am writing you as a resident of Regional 12 School District about the plan by the Region 12 Board of Education (the "BOE") for an AgSTEM facility at Shepaug Valley School (the "Proposed AgSTEM Program"), which is being considered for funding by the State Legislature. My primary concern is that in our current situation of scarce resources, the Proposed AgSTEM Program is a poor use of scarce taxpayer dollars.

The Proposed AgSTEM Program was approved by Region 12 voters last fall, but it was presented in a special election where there was a low turnout. Approval came as no surprise since the BOE's various presentations to Region 12 voters described only the potential benefits to Region 12, and failed to mention the significant financial risks if the highly optimistic and unprecedented enrollment projections fail to materialize. Instead, the BOE's principal financial argument was that the project was essentially "free money" from the state, since the state would bear the lion's share of the costs. Sadly, this idea – that it's okay to waste other people's money – is pernicious and pervades too much of our civic discourse.

I urge you to deny funding for the Proposed AgSTEM Program for two important reasons: first, its success is based on highly unrealistic projections about new enrollment which, if enrollment fails to materialize, will result in a financial disaster for Region 12 schools and a complete waste of state taxpayer money. What's going on here is that the BOE is responding to declining student enrollment by foolishly "doubling down" and proposing to spend \$40 million and build an additional 80,000 square feet to the existing, underutilized 164,000 square foot campus.

To justify this, the BOE asserts that it can attract and retain nearly 200 new students from out-of-district towns (the "sending towns") over the next twenty years. The BOE is essentially betting that the sending towns, who themselves face declining enrollments, will

gladly subsidize sending their students to other schools, and continue to do so for the next twenty years in order to pay off the debt.

In response to this obvious concern, when the Proposed AgSTEM Program was approved by the State Board of Education, it imposed the following condition:

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.

Elsewhere in the approval package, the State Board of Education described this condition in greater detail:

The following local boards of education support and will collaborate in this endeavor: Brookfield, Danbury, New Fairfield, New Milford, Newtown, and Sherman. The aforementioned districts agree to send students with an interest in agriculture to the Shepaug Agriscience STEM Academy beginning in the fall of 2018.

I am advised that currently the sending towns send a total of only 56 students to Region 14, meaning 142 short of the 196 that the BOE says are needed to make the Region 12 project financially viable. The BOE has asserted that there are an additional 60 students from the sending towns on Region 14's wait list, bringing the potential total to 116. That is still a long way from 196. Worse, however, is the fact that all of those sending towns except Danbury (the farthest away) are experiencing their own declining enrollment, so it beggars belief that they will increase the number of students they send by approximately 69% in the face of their own declines. Further, given the twenty years that it will take to pay off the bonds from the Proposed AgSTEM Program, the sending towns would have to sustain these levels for twenty years as their own enrollments dwindle.

It is important also to note that the sending towns are only required 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*" (emphasis added). There is no specific percentage increase required, let alone a requirement that they increase the number by the 69% necessary for the financial success of the Proposed AgSTEM Program. Nor is there any requirement that they maintain this increase for the twenty years that the bonds will be outstanding.

It seems clear to me – and I hope to you as well – that although the Board of Education made an effort to address the issue of financial viability by imposing the condition of assents by the sending towns, the condition as written offers no such assurances.

My second reason for urging you to deny state funding for the Proposed AgSTEM Program is that it takes precious resources away from other important state education programs in order to fritter them on such things as a multi-million dollar equestrian facility. There are already two AgSTEM programs in existence within a ten-mile radius. If need be, let's expand those. In an era of scarcity, building lavish and unnecessary new facilities to garner state subsidies, when the needs of so many less fortunate children go unanswered, seems to me to be at best wrong-headed and at worst immoral.

Thank you for your consideration of my concerns.

Respectfully yours,

Erica M. Ryland

CC: Hon. Arthur O'Neill
Hon. Rob Kane