

TESTIMONY OF GREGORY J. CAVA
IN FAVOR OF HB 5304 BEFORE THE EDUCATION COMMITTEE

February 24, 2016

Ladies and Gentlemen, my name is Gregory J. Cava. I live and practice law in Roxbury, Connecticut in Litchfield County and a two-term elected member of the Regional School District 12 Board of Education. Last November, by a 68% super-majority, the voters of the three towns making up our region approved a referendum to expend the funds and issue bonds to make the Shepaug Valley (High) School the 20th vocational agricultural high school in Connecticut to serve the towns of Bridgewater, Brookfield, New Fairfield, New Milford, Newtown, Roxbury, Sherman, Washington, and the City of Danbury. I chair the Region's Building Committee for this construction project.

I am here to speak to you on my own behalf to urge you to support HB 5304 and in particular the entire state grant commitment for Region 12. This project will expand the opportunities available to the students of our Region and the sending towns and help meet the student demand for additional vocational agricultural seats.

First I regret that I must use my limited speaking time to address the clever spinning of facts into a false narrative perpetrated by a few opponents of the project in an effort to mislead the Committee.

First, the Region did not mislead the voters as to the enrollment necessary to make the program self-sustaining. It is true that an enrollment of 196 students would be necessary. The opponents claim that the Region sent a mailer right before the vote indicating that that number was only 49. First, the mailer said not 49 students total, but 49 students *per year* (49×4 HS classes = 196); second the mailer was sent not by the Region, but by Shepaug Residents in Support of Education, a Political Action Committee. (Copy attached). I know, I was the PAC's treasurer.

Second, the opponents claim the Region has not complied with a state board requirement that each of the six sending municipalities (Brookfield, Danbury, New Fairfield, New Milford, Newtown and Sherman) confirm they will send more students than they are currently sending to the program at Nonewaug High School. In fact, each of the six towns previously sent letters confirming that they would send their VO-AG students to Region 12. However, when it was discovered that the state board required that the letters confirm they would send *additional* students, a new request was made, three of the six towns have provided the revised letter and the other three are in the process of doing so. This is a red herring.

Finally, the opponents claim that the nine towns that will make up the Shepaug program are not currently sending enough students to make our numbers. What they have failed to tell you is that because Nonewaug, with its largest-in-the-state 23-town catchment area, was turning away 50 to 60 qualified applicants per year, they long ago stopped actively recruiting. In order to test demand, the Director of the program at Nonewaug, rather than waiting for the students to send applications on their own, went to each of the schools in their catchment area and met with all of the eighth graders. Rather than 35 or 40 applications typically received from these nine towns, they were at last count processing 117 applications

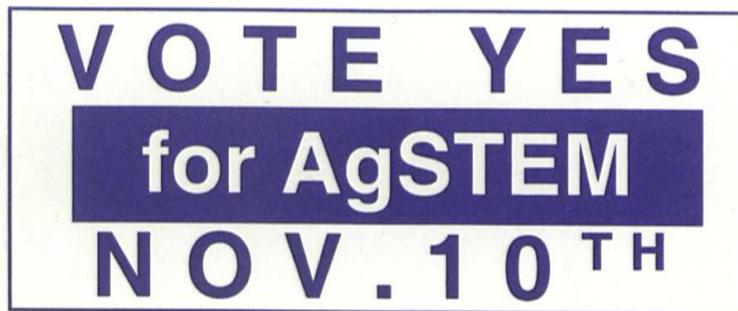
from rising freshmen in just the sending towns of the Region 12 catchment area¹. This indicates that there is a demand, in fact more than twice the demand, necessary to make our project self-sustaining.

I know people are passionate about school issues. But there is no excuse for spinning cherry-picked ‘facts’ into a false narrative in an effort to mislead this Committee, a Committee doing the people’s business, into nullifying the informed judgment of more than 68% of the voters in Roxbury, 61% of the voters in Bridgewater and 73% of the voters in Washington. These same stale tropes were offered to the voters of our region. Wisely, the voters didn’t buy them and neither should you.

As an elected member of a regional Board of Education, it is my judgment that vocational agricultural science is the right solution for us, that our project is fiscally and programmatically sound, and will result in one of the best and most rigorous programs in the State to train the future scientists, state and federal regulators, innovators in food science, farmers - in short – the young people who will feed the world, many of them from good jobs right here in Connecticut. With H.B. 5304, you have the opportunity to join us in helping them build our future. As the Education Committee, you already know how important this mission is.

I thank you for your consideration and urge your support of H.B. 5304 and would be happy to answer your questions.

¹ The Region 12 catchment area was identified to include the three towns in the region, Bridgewater, Roxbury and Washington, and the seven municipalities of Bethel, Brookfield, Danbury, New Fairfield, New Milford, Newtown and Sherman. Bethel has not made a commitment to join the Shepaug program. Even if the 117 number includes Bethel, the point is the same: as the Board predicted before the Nonewaug director did a recruitment pitch in 2015, recruitment would substantially boost the numbers of applications well beyond what would be needed to make the program self-sustaining. And this is without the lure of a new school facility with a shorter commute as Shepaug will be for most if not all of the new students.



WHY?

**The demand is there – we will get
the 49 students we need**

This year, Nonnewaug did something it has not done in years –
it talked to every 8th grader in its sending towns.
Of the 9 sending towns that will be in the Shepaug AgSTEM district,
117 applications are being processed for next year's freshman class –
two and one-half times the 49 students per year we need to make our
program pay for itself.

The community supports AgSTEM

The Roxbury-based Diebold Foundation has made a \$1 Million pledge
of generous private-sector support to enrich the AgSTEM program –
if we vote to pass the AgSTEM referendum.

AgSTEM is the answer

It pays for itself and the increased enrollment allows us to offer
more opportunities and course offerings for our own students.

**Please Vote YES for AgSTEM on November 10.
For yourself. For our towns.
For our students!**