



**School Construction Aid Task Force**  
October 11, 2023, 9:00am – 11:00 a.m.

Per [Act 78 of 2023, section E131.1](#) (see page 196), a School Construction Aid Task Force is created to examine, evaluate, and report on issues relating to school construction aid.

Approved Meeting Minutes

**Task Force Members Present:**

Heather Bouchey, Secretary of Education  
Bruce MacIntire, Vermont School Custodians and Maintenance Association  
David Weeks, Senator  
David Epstein, Gubernatorial Appointee  
Chris Young, Vermont Principals' Association Designee  
Peter Conlon, Representative  
Jon Wilkinson, Gubernatorial Appointee  
Jeff Francis, Vermont Superintendent's Association  
Sue Ceglowski, Vermont School Boards Association  
Martine Gulick, Senator  
Chris Taylor, Representative  
Michael Gaughan, Vermont Bond Bank  
Eric Lafayette, EEI Services  
Ben Doyle, Preservation Trust Vermont

**Also Attending:**

Ashlynn Doyon, Treasurer's Office  
Jill Briggs Campbell, Agency of Education  
Scott Baker, Treasurer's Office  
Justin St. James, Treasurer's Office  
Jeremiah Breer, Treasurer's Office  
Bob Donohue, Agency of Education  
Steve Wisloski, PRAG  
Tom Huestis, PRAG  
Christine Fay, PRAG  
Marc Schaubert  
Sarah Waring, USDA Rural Development

**Call to Order and Opening Remarks:**

Secretary Bouchey called the meeting to order at 9:04 a.m.

**Approval of September 27, 2023:**

Mr. Wilkinson moved to approve of the minutes of September 27, 2023. Mr. MacIntire seconded the motion. There were no additions or changes to the minutes. No further discussion. The minutes passed unanimously.

**Public to Be Heard (Public Comment):**

Secretary Bouchey announced an opportunity for public comment. No one asked to be heard at this time.

### **AOE Presentation on School Construction Aid Governance Programs:**

Bob Donohue presented on behalf of AOE, a presentation that reviewed the school construction aid governance programs of Colorado, Massachusetts, Maine, Texas, and Vermont's suspended program. (See slide deck presentation.)

Jill Briggs Campbell asked a question about whether or not Colorado has a points scale to rank its priority subgroups.

Secretary Bouchey asked about the timing of applications and the submission process in Colorado.

Jeff Francis shared an article about the condition of Colorado schools that included a quote from the Colorado State Treasurer.

David Epstein noted that Colorado is different from Vermont in that it is experiencing a lot of growth. He also noted that school districts in Vermont have historically had a difficult time funding their capital plans and keeping up with deferred maintenance.

Senator Gulick noted that she has heard from superintendents that when you ask voters to choose capital projects or programming, that they usually choose programming.

Secretary Bouchey asked if there is any other information available from other highly rural states that have grappled with the issue of governance consolidation.

Ben Doyle raised the issue of thinking about the broader context of community and economic development and how we might attract people to live in areas that have had a lack of investment.

David Epstein noted that he hopes that the group begins to discuss the bigger questions of state policy, direction, and what the future end goal of schools looks like.

Senator Gulick suggested that the task force has an opportunity to make meaningful, structural changes, in how we do education in Vermont.

Jeff Francis agreed, stating that he hopes AOE will be able to provide an estimated dollar figure of the overall need and that the Treasurer's Office will help the group to explore funding or financing sources that might be available. Then there will be a reconciliation of the need with the available resources.

Rep. Taylor reiterated David Epstein's point that it would be irresponsible for the State to make investments if there was not a requirement that school districts continue upkeep.

Jill Briggs Campbell noted that a component of Rhode Island's program is a heavy incentive to consolidate into high quality regional schools, as well as a sliding scale of State support based on poverty levels.

### **USDA Rural Development Loan and Grant Programs to Fund Schools and Education**

Sarah Waring gave a presentation to the task force on the more than 75 grant and loan guarantee programs offered through USDA Rural Development that support economic development in rural communities. (See slide deck presentation.)

Rep. Conlon asked about USDA's involvement in the Winooski School construction project and the level of financing they received.

Sarah Waring noted that grant eligibility is based on population size and median household income for the region.

Chris Young asked if Vermont were to ramp up its relationship with USDA, whether there is one particular program that we should focus on in order to bolster applications across the board.

Sarah Waring noted that technical assistance in grant writing for these projects seems to be of particular concern in Vermont because of the varying capacity to do this kind of work across different districts. She also noted that the NEK has a special designation and funding allocation.

Ben Doyle noted that the answer to the question of whether or not it would be possible for the USDA to bundle a giant loan that could supplement funds from the State, is probably no. He also noted that there is a threshold of risk appetite in the portfolio of community facilities.

Bob Donohue asked a question about multiuse projects, such as those that incorporate housing proposals as well. Senator Gulick echoed this idea.

Jill Briggs Campbell also suggested that it might be worth thinking about how schools could function as community resilience centers in emergencies.

Senator Gulick noted that it seems like it would be worth it for the group to reach out to the federal delegation to advocate in some of these areas.

Sarah Waring noted that this is the year of the farm bill, where these program provisions are outlined in legislation.

Bruce MacIntire stated that while this was a great presentation, he does think that we need to design a program that is not going to rely on rural development funds or low income loans, because the need far surpasses the capacity in those areas.

### **Adjournment**

The meeting adjourned at 11:06 a.m.