



SUPERIOR COURT



Joel Morale, in wheelchair, listens to Essex County Superior Court Judge Robert Colby in Essex Superior Court on Monday, Nov. 12, 2019. (Photo By Todd Wellington)

# Man Denies Assault on Neighbors With Motorized Wheelchair

BY TODD WELLINGTON  
Staff Writer

A 56-year-old Essex County man is in jail after being accused of slashing his neighbors' car tires and assaulting them with his motorized wheelchair. Joel Morale, 56, pleaded not guilty in Essex Superior Court Monday to multiple counts of simple assault, mischief, disorderly conduct, stalking and violation of a domestic violence prevention order. The charges stem from several incidents with his neighbors living in an apartment complex at 29 Jefferson Avenue in Gilman Village.

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NEK

NORTHEAST KINGDOM & NORTH COUNTRY

# NH-VT Education Dept Heads Weigh Interstate District

## Plummeting Enrollments Prompt Local Districts To Consider Merger Across State Line

BY AMY ASH NIXON  
Staff Writer

CANAAN — About 20 local and state-level education leaders met Thursday at Canaan High School to discuss formation of an interstate secondary school district to serve three school districts on both sides of the Connecticut River in northern New Hampshire and Vermont.

With both states' Commissioners of Education at the helm of the discussion, members of a local committee that has been discussing a twin-state school district for grades 7-12 discussed the challenges facing the districts,

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• Reality Of Declining Local Demographics  
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The heads of both Vermont and New Hampshire's education departments attended a discussion Thursday in Canaan on plans to study an interstate school district. (Photo by Amy Ash Nixon)

and their hoped-for future as a regional NH-VT district.

A group of local citizens and educators has been holding meetings to discuss an inter-state district through the Connecticut River Collaborative Exploratory Committee.

Helping to guide the discussion, and present questions on the committee's behalf were Karen Conroy, superintendent of Essex North Supervisory Union, which serves Canaan School District and the year-old Northeast Kingdom School Choice District, formed under Act 46, Vermont's 2015 statewide school district consolidation law.

The same pressures that brought Act 46 to the forefront are playing out in the communities at the table in discussing a possible inter-state district.

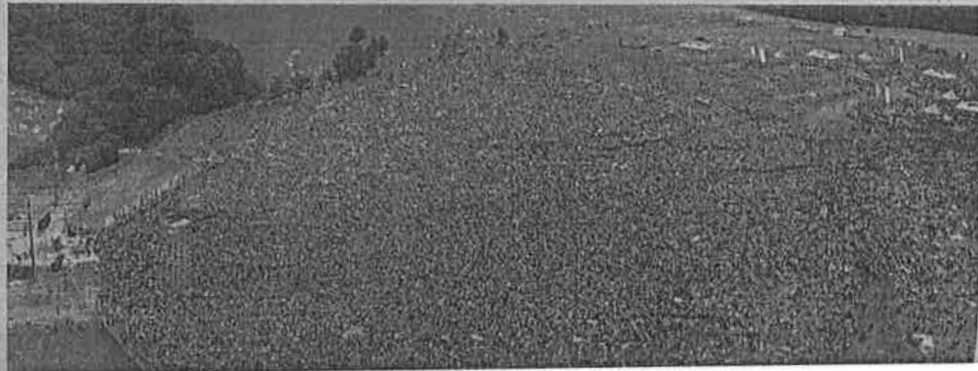
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50 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

# Local Residents Remember Woodstock

## Peter Riviere, David Van Houten, Woody Miller Share Memories Of Historic Festival

BY ROBERT BLECHL  
Staff Writer



A half century ago this week, Peter Riviere, David Van Houten, and Woody Miller were in the middle of

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Discussed were declining enrollment, tax pressures, a need to bolster programs with higher student ratios, and building needs.

On the committee are members from SAU#7 in New Hampshire, including Clarksville, Colebrook, Columbia, Pittsburg and Stewartstown, and from Essex North Supervisory Union, Canaan and the NEK Choice District, a 10-town district of non-operating towns.

#### State Ed Commissioners Offer Support

Vermont Secretary of Education Dan French and Commissioner of the New Hampshire Department of Education Frank Edelblut sat at a table in front, fielding questions the committee prepared. Both said they support the exploratory step and will happily work with the towns.

Dozens of community meetings have been held across the towns in the past year, and committee member Brian LaPerle, from Colebrook, said everyone at the table was ready to move ahead and formally begin a group that would work to present a twin-state school district to voters.

The group hoped to formally create an official planning committee as the final step at the meeting, with a 2 p.m. agenda time set for that action.

But both heads of the state education departments said they need to discuss together, then with the local superintendents, next steps in the start of a formal process.

SAU #7 Superintendent Bruce Beasley said early in the 2-hour meeting that student opportunities were chief in the discussions to date, and then the financial side of the possible merger.

From community forums in the past year, Beasley said there are many concerns, from how much money may be saved to how many teachers could lose their jobs.

"As we continue to work on this, those are the answers we are really trying to gain," said Beasley, saying the communities' sense of pride in their local schools is deep, and the group will need to work to help citizens "see it as one regional effort as opposed to something that impacts one town."

#### No New Schools; Canaan, Colebrook Possible Regional Schools

Except for Canaan, whose elementary pupils would attend Stewartstown, the early look at changes would see the other towns keep their elementary schools intact. Colebrook would become a middle school and Canaan a high school to serve the region.

Both state education heads said demographics have — and continue — to decline, and rural areas such as the towns at the table in Canaan on Thursday are wise to look at ways to work as a region, to best serve students.

What's been talked about is a

high school in Canaan that would consolidate that town with Colebrook and Pittsburg's high school programs. Combined, the three high schools this year have 210 students.

Beasley said in each of those high schools, there is a calculus class, for example, with 1, 2 or 4 students sitting in chairs, and by combining that class could have 8 pupils — but there would be ability to offer more opportunities by combining and not duplicating extremely low-enrollment courses.

"We could use those resources to offer more," he said.

Edelblut said at the outset that he was not in the North Country from Concord with orders. "We're here to support whatever the community decides is best for your kids," he said.

He was trying to get a picture of what early parameters the group is working with, including that a Career Technical Education center would be in Canaan, a central location, and they would want to see more workforce development programs added to benefit the region's economy.

Another decision already in hand is that the committee is not looking to build, but to use the two buildings noted as middle and high school possibilities.

#### Buildings To Be Assessed For Use As Interstate Middle, High Schools

Conroy said professionals from Black River Design will be visiting soon to take stock of the buildings and come up with estimates, noting that a grant from the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation is assisting with the group's early work to start planning an interstate district.

Beasley said the group agrees that there will be "no new rooftops," saying the existing buildings can work, and keeping the local elementary schools is "what's best for the kids at this point."

French said there are two existing NH-VT inter-state districts, the newest one being Rivendell straddling the river at Orford, N.H. and Fairlee, Vt. The North Country committee plans a visit there in September.

"It's basically like planning to get married," said French of the local committee now seeking state blessing to begin a formal process. "Now you're enjoying the benefits of an informal relationship," he said, saying the two education heads need answers to some questions before they consider the marriage.

French said several times that when the group has worked with its communities and people are using the phrase "all our kids," they will have arrived at a place where an inter-state district may be achievable.

Voters will have the ultimate say in the formation of an inter-state district.

"One of your jobs is to determine if it's a good idea or not," said French. "Is it even advisable?"

One of the questions came from NEK Choice District member Sharon Ellingwood-White of Lemington, who asked how the non-operating district would fit in — that is one of the issues that will have to be reviewed as the work begins.

The commissioners asked how the choice district works, and Ellingwood-White explained that the towns banded together to preserve school choice and are seeing less spikes in taxes now that they are a regional district, and the district sends 70 students to New Hampshire schools from Vermont's Northeast Kingdom's non-operating districts.

Another area that will see high citizen interest and will be important for the committee to work on is assets and debts in proposing a new district, the group discussed.

"They wanted those answers yesterday," said Canaan School Board Chairman Dan Wade about the financial matters around forming a two-state district.

#### Taxpayers Concerns

Of the committee's work ahead, Canaan Board Chairman Dan Wade said the school board members have the students' education front and center, but residents' chief concerns are focused on taxes.

"For us, it's the kids, for them, it's money," he said of the reality of selling a merger plan.

How towns would be represented on a regional school board was also touched on, and one option is proportional representation, it was discussed.

Both heads of the education departments promised to help the communities as they embark on the process and to be a resource along the way.

Edelblut said the two heads of the state education departments cannot give legal advice, saying they must remain at arm's length because they have the charge of regulatory oversight.

"This is a complex process," said French, saying the towns will need help. "I don't know if you can do this on your own."

Edelblut said the two heads of the state education departments will assist as the process moves ahead.

"You've got to tell us what you want ... so that we know how to support you," he said. "Some of those battles are going to be really easy and for some of them, we're going to have to do a little gymnastics during the process."

French said, "Let's put kids first and figure out how to make it work."

To the demographic decline in Essex County, French, who worked in the region earlier in his education career, said 40 percent of the pupils have declined in 12 years.

"The demographic challenges are real," he emphasized. "And they're not going to be resolved by competing for students that don't exist."