

EDUCATION

9 Noes Later, Vt. Town To Finish Year It Never Voted To Begin

By Lonnie Harp — June 14, 1995 ⌚ 8 min read

Fair Haven, Vt.

Just off the town square here, Charlie Usher is sitting on a park bench wishing he could conjure some homespun pearl of wisdom for the stranger sitting next to him.

If only the Benson Village School District were like a box of chocolates. But Mr. Usher knows all too well what he is going to get.

In a time when political observers have made a cottage industry out of dissecting the thoughts and motivations of unhappy voters, Mr. Usher, the district's assistant superintendent, and others here are still trying to unravel what, exactly, the stubborn electorate in nearby Benson is saying.

Nine times now, the voters have gone to the polls and rejected the district budget for 1994-95. They have also given thumbs down to the district's first shot at the tab for next year.

Next week, the 137-student K-8 district pinned between the Green Mountains and the New York State border will distinguish itself in a fashion that recalls "The Twilight Zone": Benson will become the first school district in Vermont to finish a school year that it never voted to begin.

Such notoriety is an odd twist for a rural crossroads marked by dairy barns and Victorian farmhouses.

The troubles of Benson--another American small town that is getting poorer and smaller--would not surprise anyone. And the common complaints aimed at the district over mandates and bureaucracy and new teaching methods are nothing out of the blue. But the circumstances and doubts of the 800 voters in Benson, Vt., have joined to create a thorny case of gridlock.

“This is like when you get a big knot in your fishing tackle, and you hope that as you untangle one knot, another one might fall out,” Mr. Usher said optimistically. “But first you have to find the right point of entry.”

Paying for Progress

So far, things have only gotten more complicated. State law, which allows Vermont schools to operate a “minimal” school program in the absence of a voter-approved budget, has allowed administrators time to think and in some ways made it easier for voters to say no. But next year, a new state law will require Benson to make deep cuts if a budget is not passed--and local officials fear they are not moving toward a resolution.

“It’s really a riddle, as opposed to a problem,” Mr. Usher said, “where the traditional resources might be adequate to solve it. We haven’t found anything that would take care of this.”

Part of the problem is the Benson Village School itself, a new building that lords over the pastures that slope down from its playground.

In March 1994, taxpayers were reminded they must swallow a \$45,000 increase in bond payments for the new building.

That pushed the local property-tax bill up 32 percent--from the previous year’s \$346,000 to about \$457,000. The increase, which included \$25,000 more for bus services, \$15,000 for computers, \$6,000 for the library, and \$5,700 for special-education assessments, was too rich for taxpayers, creating a total budget of more than \$897,000.

Of the 225 people who showed up to vote, only 44 approved of the increase.

About three months later, a \$30,000 reduction in the budget netted only two more votes for approving it.

On June 30 of last year, an additional cut of \$8,000 netted only 37 yes votes.

When the district lowered its request to \$852,302, it won 151 votes, nearly as many as the yes votes on the last two failed ballots combined. But it was Nov. 8--Election Day--and the old gymnasium in the building that houses the Benson library was teeming with voters. The budget lost again as 195 no ballots were counted.

The budget has not been able to attract more than 45 percent of the vote, reaching that mark again on the ninth vote on March 28 of this year--the one that promised Benson a place in the history books. In a weak turnout, that budget went down 90 to 75.

Over the year of going to the voters, the district has shuffled and reshuffled its numbers, trying to hit on something that the residents of Benson would buy. By the ninth vote, the district had deleted all funding for guidance and coaching; its library increase was cut more than half; and no increase was sought for bus services.

“When you’re in the budget business, you look for the magic number, but this is deeper than that,” Mr. Usher said.

“I don’t think these people are going to budge at all,” added Theresa Mulholland, the principal for the past six years at the Benson school. “Nobody has an agenda; I think they just want to say no.”

New School, Old Ways

Local residents have many problems with the schools they claim to prize. And while people in the Benson district have taken their stand in a graphic way, the conflicts here echo the themes of education debates in school districts across the country.

The price of the new school building has brought with it some sticker shock. Not surprisingly, Benson voters were hesitant to take on the cost of the building, though the existing school was on the verge of being condemned. In 1991, a vote on a \$955,000 bond to foot the local share of a new building was defeated. When a \$1 million bond issue passed a year later on a 165-to-121 vote, the town two months later went to the polls and by a 211-to-120 vote chose to reconsider. After a second vote approving the building funds, construction began.

But many still argue that the building is too expensive.

Some residents are angry with individual members of the school board, despite the fact that people almost have to be recruited to fill board seats.

Many farmers see property taxes take a huge bite out of their farm income because they own large parcels of land. In recent years, Benson schools have increasingly come to serve low-income and transient residents who live in trailers or rundown homes. They pay a minimal tax

and often send the most troubled children to schools, raising costs for special education and other services.

There are rumblings about the cost of a full-time principal versus one who also spends time teaching.

Some residents resent that the district hires a librarian and a nurse, and some do not agree with the number of teachers in the small school. Class sizes are about 15 students for every teacher, and some taxpayers suggest that there may be one to two teachers too many.

Others have found that the district's reform focus has driven something of a wedge between it and parents as the schools envision a role of preparing students for a global economy.

"People want change, but then they ask 'Why are you doing that?'" said Ms. Mulholland, who is leaving Benson to become the principal at a larger Vermont elementary school in Arlington. Frustration over the votes was not a big factor in her departure, she said, though the budget impasse weighs on everyone at the school.

No Place To Talk

"They want something for nothing," Ms. Mulholland said of the voters. "It's like they have only \$10 to spend, but they want the best. When you tell them that there is nothing 'best' you can get for \$10, that it will cost \$20 or \$25, they say O.K., but then some of them will fight tooth and nail and say you could have gotten it for \$10. And it's hard to bridge that attitude."

Officials here also have found themselves pinched between the financial ire of local taxpayers and the reform desires of state lawmakers, but without a clear channel to either party.

Despite the painted church pew that sits on the porch of the Benson General Store inviting conversation, local officials have found that there is no true forum for a communitywide discussion or even a place to talk with influential residents.

"When I've asked where is a forum where we can talk about this, they can't identify it," Mr. Usher said.

"There used to be a congregation or a fraternal order or someplace where you could talk about the concerns of the community," he said, "but those entities do not exist now or do not exist in

the numbers we need to make any difference.”

Local officials have had a hard time explaining that state regulations require a librarian, a guidance counselor, and a nurse at elementary schools. State guidelines call for a full-time principal in schools with as many teachers as in Benson.

At the same time, it has been equally impossible to be heard at the state level.

As the district has moved to embrace many of the school-reform notions being promoted by state leaders, it has seen state aid fall by \$104,000 over the past six years. Over a shorter span, the state has considered a number of tax-reform plans and recommendations to take on a bigger share of school spending--all to no avail except to create more task forces for more discussion.

Local officials realize that beyond the novelty of its situation, the fact that Benson is hamstrung has had little impact in Montpelier, the state capital. And a new law that will allow school districts to spend 87 percent of their last approved budget if they cannot win voter approval of a new one will force a showdown in Benson as fall approaches.

The last budget the district approved was for \$798,687 for the 1993-94 school year. That was before the bond payment went up. At the 87 percent mark, the district could spend less than \$700,000 next year, forcing drastic cuts.

‘A Cultural Thing’

At stake is a wholesale change in education that has occurred in Benson classrooms over the past five years. School officials have jumped into team teaching, multi-age classrooms, and other new practices to raise standards in the Benson school. They would like to add computers and other resources that would prepare the students for advanced classes when they head to high school in Fair Haven or college or work elsewhere.

“We’ve moved Benson from a small farm-town school to one looking to the 21st century,” Ms. Mulholland said. “We’ve tried to make this a real live school that allows children to look at their opportunities and realize that the days of dropping out at 16 and getting a job on the farm are over.”

And while the selectmen of Benson will vote this summer to levy a property tax to pay off this year’s school bills, the problem here is far from being solved.

But Mr. Usher, who is sitting on a park bench in Fair Haven to escape a stuffy office on an 80-degree Vermont afternoon, admits that he is not close to solving Benson's riddle.

"This is a cultural thing, and what it says is we have a lot to solve at the local level because that's the only way this is going to be solved whether it's in Benson, Vermont, or Amarillo, Texas, or Eugene, Oregon," Mr. Usher said.~~

"The answer is not getting this budget passed," he said. "The answer is getting at the root of why people would be willing to let their schools fall apart and think somebody else will catch them."

Lonnie Harp

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