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Notes from editor (not for publication):

Obviously, I split this into two stories. Is there a draft report available? She mentions it and encourages people to read it, but should we clarify that it is not available for public consumption yet?

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

#####BEGIN HED#####

1 Redistricting Task Force will recommend a slower
2 approach

#####END HED#####

#####BEGIN SUBHED#####

3 Sen. Wendy Harrison: Vermonters want committee to
4 'directly address the drivers of increasing costs, help support
5 school facilities, and take care to not cause harm'

#####END SUBHED#####

6 TEXT BODY:

#####BEGIN TEXT#####

7 Members of the Vermont School District Redistricting
8 Task Force are in final meetings to analyze how to shrink
9 education costs.

10 Last week, the 11 members, who are in favor of
11 voluntary district mergers, said that rather than pursue a map
12 based on counties or career and technical education (CTE), they
13 now favor a 10-year plan with district incentives to merge so as to
14 gain state construction aid and develop regional high schools
15 with regions sharing cooperative services.

16 “I’m proud of our work, and I encourage people to read
17 the report,” Sen. Wendy Harrison (D-Windham), told *The*
18 *Commons* on Nov. 17, saying the Task Force includes “a good
19 balance of legislators and experienced Vermont educators.”

20 “We agreed from the start to prioritize evidence-based
21 information and the goal of increasing effective and equitable
22 education districts,” said Harrison, of Brattleboro, one of six
23 lawmakers on the panel.

24 With some far-flung districts in the state and four public
25 hearings under their belts, Task Force Co-chair Chittenden
26 Democrat Sen. Martine Larocque Gulick said none of the
27 feedback has supported the work the focus group is doing or the
28 maps it has made.

29 The Task Force meets to complete its work Nov. 20 and
30 has been charged to submit a report to the state Legislature Dec.
31 1.

32 As legislators ponder ways to expand educational
33 opportunities while curtailing costs, the group was formed under
34 Act 73 to recommend new school district boundaries and
35 configurations, realizing the state has fewer students than it did
36 25 years ago yet a comparable number of schools, although
37 support services and costs are higher.

38 **‘Take care to not cause harm’**

39 The Task Force’s approach of recommending a none-of-
40 the-above option has drawn criticism from Gov. Phil Scott.

41 “Last year, Vermonters spoke loudly and clearly: their
42 property taxes are too high,” the governor posted on social media
43 on Nov. 17. “That’s one of the reasons why we need to move

44 forward with education transformation. If we stick with the status
45 quo, taxpayers will continue to see significant property tax
46 increases year after year, while students see opportunities
47 slashed.

48 "I will not accept that," he wrote.

49 Education Secretary Zoie Saunders told the Task Force
50 that its proposal doesn't match Act 73's intention because it
51 doesn't recommend a particular map. She also noted the
52 potential of creating an even more complex system with more
53 red tape and costing more.

54 Harrison serves as chair of the Institutions Committee,
55 clerk and ranking member of the Transportation Committee, and
56 sits on the CHIP Subcommittee.

57 "The majority of us rejected forced mergers, putting kids
58 first and local control a close second," she said. "We saw that
59 cooperative service agencies (unlike forced mergers) are a proven
60 method to reduce costs.

61 "The first of these agencies is already in place in our area
62 and is not another layer of bureaucracy. The data shows that
63 central Windham County could become a public school desert if
64 we're not careful, and the Task Force's majority recommendations
65 address this concern."

66 Harrison said she has spoken at length with teachers,
67 administrators, and school board members prior to the Task Force
68 work.

69 The Task Force heard from more than 5,000 Vermonters
70 and "most said that we should slow down, directly address the
71 drivers of increasing costs, help support school facilities, and take
72 care to not cause harm."

73 "My overarching position going into this work was that
74 public education must survive and thrive throughout Vermont
75 because effective and accessible public education is essential to
76 maintaining a healthy democracy," Harrison said.

77 "I also saw opportunities for support of school facilities
78 through the work of the Institutions Committee, which I chair, as

79 well as opportunities to coordinate school transportation with
80 other under-funded transportation needs," she added. "I still hold
81 these values and opinions."

82 Harrison also said she "generally agrees" with the
83 Vermont Superintendents Association's reaction to the work of
84 the Task Force, especially their recommendation that the tax
85 policy in Act 73 should proceed independently and that "fiscal
86 policy should serve, not dictate, education policy."

87 And she agrees with Saunders that "it would be better to
88 manage school choice through policy than through governance
89 structure."

90 "School choice is a complicated and critically important
91 part of these conversations," said Harrison. "Local control means
92 different things to different people. The autonomy of school
93 districts is important in different ways to different districts.

94 "My opinion is that the current system is unnecessarily
95 complicated and that we should extract school choice policy
96 from being intertwined with school district policy," she added.
97 "As stated in our draft Task Force report, we should 'realign the
98 tuition system with its original purpose: ensuring access to
99 education rather than creating market completion."

100 Follow meetings and review the testimony received on
101 the Redistricting Task Force at its [website](#).

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Bio/COATTAIL:

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102

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VIDEO:

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LOGLINE (SOCIAL MEDIA):

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