

Leaving RSU 18 may hurt Belgrade taxpayers

On November's ballot, Belgrade voters will vote on an article asking whether Belgrade is to start the process of withdrawing from Regional School Unit 18.

If approved, Belgrade would negotiate with RSU 18 the terms of a contractual agreement to affect that change. Under Maine law, this agreement must spell out how Belgrade will educate its kids, establish a school board, hire a superintendent and pay its share of RSU 18's existing debt service.

The article authorizes the committee to spend up to \$15,000 of town funds primarily for the services of an attorney to help draft the withdrawal agreement. The resulting contract would then need to be approved by the Maine Department of Education and Belgrade voters. If approved, a Belgrade school department, rather than RSU 18, would be responsible for the education of our kids and grandchildren.

Advocates of this proposal market it as a means to reduce the cost of K-12 education to Belgrade property owners. Ironically, it is far more likely to have the exact opposite effect — an increase in property taxes.

How have property taxes changed in those Maine municipalities that have already withdrawn from a RSU? According to state records, 13 towns left RSUs statewide and formed municipal school departments from 2012 to 2015. Based on the most recent estimates from Maine Revenue Services of full value property tax rates in 2015 for these Maine municipalities, 12 of the 13 towns had their rates increase. Tax rates increased from 0.5 percent (Saco) to 56 percent (Brighton Plantation). Glenburn, with a population closest to Belgrade's, saw their property tax rate increase 6 percent.

This proposal is fiscally unsound. Withdrawing from RSU 18 will likely increase all Belgrade property taxes and be particularly hurtful to those living on low and fixed incomes. Vote no on this ballot question.

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Belgrade

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