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TO: Senate Committee on Government Operations
FROM: Catherine Dimitruk, VAPDA Chair and Executive Director Northwest Regional Planning Commission
DATE: January 25, 2024
RE: S. 159 County Governance Study Committee

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on S. 159. The Regional Planning Commissions (RPCs) recognize the need to address the challenges facing local government and therefore support this bill. Municipalities are asked to take responsibility for implementing state policy in myriad areas- greenhouse gas mitigation, phosphorus reduction, flood resilience, property valuation and complete streets to name a few. This is in addition to managing the day-to-day operations of a municipality and providing services such as policing, fire, public works, etc.

Municipal officials also see these items as important, but where there is a will there is not always a way. Vermont needs to have a comprehensive look at the services our citizens need, and the appropriate level of government to provide these services. Attached is a recent opinion letter by Windham County Regional Commission Executive Director that further expands on these issues.

RPCs will be embarking on a self-driven initiative to ask an independent expert in regional services to examine our work. Our goal is to ensure that Regional Planning Commissions are statutorily enabled and strategically positioned to meet ongoing and emerging state and municipal needs, which include governance, funding, programs, service delivery, equity, accountability, and staffing. The study will identify gaps in statutory enabling language and make recommendations on consistent and equitable statewide programming. If S. 159 becomes law, we will be happy to share our work and coordinate with the study committee.

RPCs recommend some changes to S. 159 for your consideration:

- The study committee could benefit from the addition of someone from the Vermont Town and City Management Association.
- Expand upon the items to be examined:
 - (1) enhancement and optimization of public safety;
 - (2) enhancement of regional collaboration and planning including an examination of the adequacy of statutory tools that enable municipal collaboration;
 - (3) efficient, equitable, and transparent allocation of public resources;
 - (4) promotion of effective regional public services for individuals and 11 municipalities;
 - (5) clarification of the role and oversight of elected county officials and 13 their departments;
 - (6) reduction of municipal requirements and reduction of duplicated municipal services;
 - (7) balance of availability and cost of services across municipalities in each county; and
 - (8) review of county and regional government structures in other states.

Strengthening the Capability of Governments



Understanding the Story of Town Government, and its Limitations

Chris Company, Executive Director
Windham Regional Commission
January 2024 WRC Newsletter

In October the WRC co-hosted with the Vermont League of Cities and Towns a convening in Townshend of selectboard members from throughout the region for them to have a conversation with one another, and for us to hear what they have to say about the things they're dealing with. Many of these volunteer elected municipal leaders give dozens of hours of their time each week to the needs of their respective towns, and it's still not enough. Their work has become more complex. They're navigating damage done by storm after storm, navigating state and federal requirements across multiple programs, trying to hire and retain personnel, coping with a diminishing town service volunteer pool, managing major infrastructure planning and investment, and, in cases, dealing with personal attacks and intentional obstruction of public proceedings. Everyone who attended wanted to keep the conversation going, so we'll make sure that happens.

Every day I see our towns holding on by a thread or breaking, and I fear those doing the work of towns are on the verge of breaking as well. This system that was designed more than 230 years ago when snow and mud probably made it difficult to travel beyond town boundaries for 5 months out of the year couldn't have anticipated the decision-making and administrative complexities of the 2020s, or the structural challenges that make achieving efficiencies of scale damned near impossible. I suggest we, as a state, need to have an honest conversation about what's working and what's not and what alternative models might make sense for Vermont.

As I see it we've got challenges at two different levels. The first I've laid out above – demands on towns are increasing with no end in sight with no correlating increase in capacity to meet those demands. Then there's the state level. Critical state policy depends upon the assumption that towns have the ability and capacity to act. These policy areas are broad and increasing, and include public safety, housing, transportation, climate adaptation and resilience, immediate and long-term disaster recovery, energy and greenhouse gas reduction, flood protection, economic and community development, land use and conservation, and a host of other issues. From where I sit I see towns struggling to keep up with basic town planning needs. Taking on other tasks, including statewide policy goals that towns, operating independently from one another, have little ability to affect, is beyond their political or operational capacity. We need an honest conversation about

Strengthening the Capability of Governments

what statewide policies are within a town's ability to act upon and affect, and which are necessarily the responsibility of the state if policy goals and outcomes are to be realized.

I know this isn't easy. Our towns are, to a great extent, at the heart of community identity. These tiny geographies define the character and personalities of the places we call home. Seldom do I hear community identity related to counties and certainly not regions. Identity is tied to town, and in some cases specific geographies within towns. But if as a society we don't figure out the government capacity and action issue, we stand to lose the things we value most about where we live – including people. If we don't figure out how to best develop the infrastructure necessary for the quantity of housing we must have for current and future Vermonters, we will lose our family, friends, and neighbors who have to leave because they can find no suitable housing. If we don't do the planning and put the infrastructure in place to grow our villages and downtowns away from floodwaters, these places that are central to our identity, culture, and economy will be damaged or lost to flood after flood after flood. If we fail to act to protect headwaters forests and downstream floodplains, and better accommodate the flow of floodwaters across the landscape in places and ways that don't carry away homes and livelihoods, then our lives here will be diminished in nearly every regard. Some of this can be done at the hyper-local level that is our towns. Much of it requires action among towns and by the state.

I don't pretend to have solutions to the challenges, but I'm convinced we need to get a conversation underway. This would be an ideal conversation to be taken up by the state's universities. I come out of the tradition of institutions of higher learning assisting with the assessment of statewide challenges and putting forth ideas about what might work. Wendell Berry wrote, "The significance – and ultimately the quality – of the work we do is determined by our understanding of the story in which we are taking part." Doing this work can tell us the story of ourselves, so we can more fully understand how we might conceive of governance structures that will better steward and sustain our communities.