

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before this committee today.

My name is Margaret Murray. I live at 150 Elm Street, Montpelier, Vermont, which is a duplex I have owned for 38 years. I also own a single family home in Burlington, and have been involved in a protracted legal conflict with the City of Burlington. Thus, my testimony is based upon my experiences with the cities of Montpelier and Burlington.

So much of our legislature has noble goals and good intentions. A prime example is "Act 250," an attempt in the 1970's to reign in the explosive development assaulting Vermont's land and citizens. Unfortunately in 2014, citizen input and protection by the Vermont legislature is needed now more than ever. Yet often it becomes NO HEARING, NO HEADACHES. The millions of dollars being spent annually by municipalities throughout the state without clear and constant citizen involvement is assisted by the 236 exemptions allowed under Vermont's public records laws.

The H. 823 bill being considered, seeks to remove protections from development under "Act 250", while further shrouding the activities of municipalities, their close bonds with private investors and private banks. This disrespects the procedure and rigorous review of development. The Natural Resources Board will end up being unappealable, because it will be "on the the record". It will limit the citizen's appeal to the Environmental Court to the knowledge you had before the hearing. With discovery of some facts, all others not cozy with political power, wealth and lawyers will be out in the cold.

With multiple incentives, this law will make funneling federal and state monies, faster and easier, by reducing, if not totally eliminating citizen oversight. Citizen Advisory Boards, appointed politically, or because of their funding mechanisms may rubber stamp approvals not in the taxpayers best interest. Vermonters will not benefit, when the fox is guarding the chickens.

The current court case in Burlington about a “misplaced” \$17 million highlights more than my mere words the need for accountability, public scrutiny, and basic auditing principles. Two years ago, Montpelier had a \$380,000 “error” in the form of an overpayment to a contractor. These are just two examples of major misplacements of public funds, and of public trust, in the two Vermont cities which I own property.

Part of H. 823 is also outlining the Tax Incentive Financing (TIF) funding, which Milton, Montpelier, Burlington, and Barre had millions owed to the state coffers last year. Their collective response ranged from Milton’s “not paying a dime” to Montpelier’s lament “the tax regulations were confusing.” Would the legislature accept those reasons from citizen taxpayers, for not paying taxes?

To my knowledge, I have been the only private citizen to testify to date in this matter. I follow over 20 individuals representing various offices and agencies, who all stand to benefit directly or indirectly by shortcuts and faster reviews of the expenditure of Vermont taxpayers’ monies. What I ask of this committee is to strengthen, not exempt

“Act 250” for the convenience of faster, denser, and more spontaneous development with Vermonters footing the bill. More citizen input, not less.

Margaret Murray