



House Government Operations Committee

H. 249, Councils of Government

May 6, 2015

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on H. 249. The Vermont League of Cities and Towns has researched and discussed the concept of locally based regional governance models for many years. In 1999 and again in 2009 we discussed options for municipal governance with the School Boards and Superintendents Associations.

On November 3, 2009, Paul Costello facilitated a meeting of local officials from around the state to consider how local governments might address the complexities and mandates of the twenty first century through a more regionally based governance structure. Please find a copy of the report attached.

Attached is a summary of governance models and a couple of object lessons in regionalization from around the country. For instance, in Maine there are five Councils of Government (COGs) as well as development corporations and regional planning commissions. The Greater Portland COG was created in 1969. Frank Bryan and John McLaughrey wrote The Vermont Papers, in which they described a Vermont version of the English shire system. It contemplated not only that some services would be provided by the shire instead of an individual town, but also that the state government would devolve authority to the shires from itself. Vermont is today one of the most centralized governments in the country.

With respect to the draft legislation as introduced, we have the following comments.

We believe that the union municipal district statute (24 VSA Chapter 121 subchapter 2) is best suited for the creation of multi-town districts such as metropolitan districts or Councils of Government. The details of creation, governance, voting, authority, expansion and dissolution or contraction have been worked out. School districts are union municipal districts as are solid waste districts and recreation districts. We also have special investigative units and multi-town community justice centers now that are special purpose government units.

There is no reason that a regional commission in particular would need to be the entity charged with creating a COG, as opposed to towns. We strongly believe that a regional governmental unit needs to be created from the local level and that 100 percent of voting representatives on the governing board must be elected or appointed municipal officials.

As is the case with union municipal districts, budgets must be voted by the citizens of the district. Purposes and functions of the district or council would likewise be voted by the citizens of the district when they vote to approve a charter for the governance unit.

We are quite concerned about language under section 4950 (b) stating that “the council, on behalf of a majority of its member municipalities may exercise any power, privilege...”

This is an exciting topic and we hope to be an integral part of any conversations about regionalization/consolidation/multi-purpose districts/ or union municipal districts.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.