

FRANKLIN-GRAND ISLE COUNTIES BAR ASSOCIATION

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Re: Opposition to “Lighten the Load” Proposal to Regionalize the Courts

Dear Chairwoman Grad and Members of the House Judiciary Committee:

By a unanimous resolution passed today at its monthly meeting, the Franklin-Grand Isle Counties Bar Association adamantly opposes the proposed 4 V.S.A. §37(b)(4) (the full text is set out below). This proposed section seeks to allow venue for all manner of cases to be consolidated into four regional courts. The provision is touted as means to improve judicial efficiency. However, any perceived savings from such a proposal pale in comparison to the costs it will impose on our citizens, not to mention the dismantling of Vermont's tradition of communities being serviced by local courts.

The true effect of regionalization will be to deprive residents of the less populous counties access to judicial resources. Citizens in the far reaches of our own counties, such as Richford, Montgomery, Enosburg, Alburgh and Grand Isle will have to travel to Burlington to attend court proceedings. Such travel would be required not just for the litigants, but for witnesses, court staff, jury members and attorneys as well. Our citizens will be forced to pay the travel and additional time costs, not only for themselves, but for witnesses and counsel too. This “cost saving” proposal will, in effect, enact a hidden tax on those residents throughout the state not fortunate enough to live close to the court hubs contemplated by this legislation. Sadly, the bill sends a message to rural residents that they are somehow less deserving of judicial services.

Our Association has long held that the way to improve judicial efficiency is to provide a meaningful and quality interface between our citizens and the courts. This requires adequate funding to:

- increase the number of court staff and judges' support staff;
- increase the number of trial court judges and law clerks;
- increase pay scales for court staff to help stem the turnover plaguing our courts;
- provide funding for more efficient use of local court space to help eliminate backlogs.

We would be happy to provide more details on how these proposals can be implemented, if you wish.

We urge the Committee to eliminate this proposal and instead consider ways to improve, rather than erode, access to justice for all Vermonters. Thank you.

Very truly yours,



Jesse D. Bugbee, Esq., President



Vanessa B. Kittell, Esq., Past President

The full text of proposed Section 37(b)(4) is as follows:

(4) The Supreme Court is authorized to designate a region of no more than four counties in which the venue for specified types of cases in the region shall be the region as a whole irrespective of the county in which the venue would lie for the case under the governing statute. A designation under this subdivision shall be made by rule and shall be reviewed by the Legislative Committee on Judicial Rules pursuant to 12 V.S.A. § 1.