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To The Editor:

We are now in our third month of the 2002 legislative session, and have been struggling with money, tax, civil rights and health care issues. As important as these challenges are, there is before us an issue that may be even more complex and more critical, for it will determine how Vermont tackles these and other challenges and opportunities for at least the next ten years.

That issue is reapportionment, or how we reconfigure our House and Senate districts to reflect the one-person-one-vote principle and ensure that all areas of the State – from the tiniest village to the largest city – are represented fairly.

The Constitution requires that at the conclusion of the census every ten years, Vermont revise its legislative representation to reflect population changes and shifts. Legislators have spent much of the last nine months reviewing various proposals, including that of the Legislative Reapportionment Board. That panel made a number of recommendations. In my view, the Board's make a glaring mistake when it proposed to leave intact the six-seat Chittenden County Senate district.

By way of background, the Vermont House, with 150 members, is broken into legislative districts, some with one Representative, some with two. For example, I represent the Chittenden 5-4 House District, a single-member district comprised of the lion's share of Shelburne. The Senate, however, is based on counties, with only three single member districts, six two-member districts, three with three members and one – Chittenden – with six of the Senate's 30 votes.

Aside from certain philosophical issues regarding rural versus urban bias, and the constitutional question of whether a Chittenden County resident (with six Senators) has more legislative clout than an Orange County resident (with one Senator) there are also practical, political considerations. Every two years, the race for the six Chittenden County seats takes on an almost surreal aura. Imagine for a minute that the Democrats, Republicans, Progressives, and Libertarians have each fielded a full slate of candidates for those six seats. Then imagine a candidate's forum or debate with 24 hopefuls involved. Imagine trying to figure out where those candidates stand on the issues, then trying to make an informed decision on Election Day. Such a race is more like a popularity contest in which people are encouraged to cast a bullet vote, i.e.; vote for only one candidate, not six. The election is often decided by popularity, not principle.

Moreover, the prospect of campaigning in a district with what is approaching 120,000 residents is a daunting one. When a primary is involved, there is virtually half to full-time campaigning from July through the November election. In an election year, when you add this commitment to the legislative session of five-plus months, the job of serving in the Senate from Chittenden County, and running for re-election, consumes eight or nine months. This virtually puts the position out of reach for folks who hold a full time job or have other commitments that most of us have. I have not mentioned the cost of the campaign, but that is a major factor as well, since Chittenden County Senate campaigns now seem to cost a minimum of \$20,000, with some candidates spending 50% more than that.

Other states seem to recognize the flaws in such a system. Only three other states – Nevada, North Carolina and West Virginia – have multi-member Senate districts. And in those states, only two Senators serve the largest district. Chittenden County, therefore, is by far the largest Senate district in the country.

Much has been made in the media of the fact that the Chittenden Senate district issue could prompt the House or the Senate to break with a legislative tradition that each chamber controls its own reapportionment proposals without input or interference from the other. While I value and respect tradition, I also believe that the

question of fair legislative representation and balance is so important to Vermont's future that it transcends Statehouse protocol and political considerations.

There are other problem areas in the proposed reapportionment plan, but I have focussed on Chittenden because I think it presents us with a window of opportunity to rectify an unfortunate situation. It is unwieldy, undemocratic and anachronistic. In other words, **IT IS BROKE; LET'S FIX IT.**

Ideally, we should adopt a simplified system of one-member districts. The interests of Democracy would be served best by single- or two-member House districts and single- or two-member Senate districts. Repairing the Chittenden County anomaly now would move Vermont back toward a path of fair, balanced representation tomorrow, and would eliminate the powerful disincentive presented by the current Chittenden Senate district to nonincumbents.

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