

I take my role in state government seriously.

I believe in the value of good government and I work hard every day to make sure we are solving problems and serving the people of Vermont well.

I am honored to have been elected by VTers to serve as Sec of State and to be entrusted with several important functions that affect so many lives each day.

Since taking office in 2011, I have worked hard to improve how our government serves the public by increasing transparency, efficiency and productivity.

I value gov't accountability & transparency as the cornerstone to building trust.

If we work diligently to create a culture of disclosure and transparency in our state and local government, we will provide a great service to Vermonters.

Through Vermont's Open Meeting Law and Public Records Act we've made it clear that Vermonters have a right:

- **To know**
- **To Attend**
- **And Participate**

We should be able to witness:

- **How decisions in government are being made,**
- **To review and sometimes criticize those decisions, and**
- **Receive nearly unfettered access to the documents created by state gov't.**

In my experience, the vast majority of government officials want to comply with the law and provide this public information.

However, the unclear parameters of the law and the lack of an intermediary between citizens and government agencies regarding public records requests creates a culture of protectionism where the default is to deny information first, rather than disclose, and await an appeal and legal action.

The fact is, unless someone is an attorney or a journalist, they are most likely not willing to pursue enforcement actions in court.

Most citizens don't know the extent of their rights when it comes to obtaining access, and they don't have the resources to turn to for appeals or enforcement of appropriate requests.

Frankly, trust in government is currently at an all-time low.

Right now many citizens feel like government decisions are being made in locked rooms behind closed doors and without their best interests in mind.

One way to disprove is to meet/make decisions out in the open for all to see.

Here in Vermont we have the opportunity to throw open the doors of government, and an Open Government Ombudsperson is the key.

A state Ombudsperson would be a resource for both citizens and government officials, providing advisory opinions, and acting as a first-level, less formal alternative to a lawsuit.

The vision should include someone with the authority to make decisions about contested public records requests and open meeting violations.

Having an intermediary as a resource and support for both citizens and government agencies would provide the tools needed to comply with the law and to ensure that our citizenry can access the greatest tool of accountability at their disposal: openness and transparency surrounding government activity.

You only need to read the news to understand how important our open government laws are and to see what a difference an Ombudsperson could make to improve transparency and access to public records.

Let's remember that the media is the public, and serves an important role keeping us all informed and keeping our government accountable!

This is an opportunity to shift our government away from a culture of denial and distrust to one of openness and transparency.

I've talked before about "letting the sun shine in" on government, and my tagline "open government is good government" won't ever stop being relevant.

Much of this legislation is based on the frequent calls, and emails we receive:

- **What is a meeting and what is not
(serial meetings, social media, attending other boards' meetings, etc)**
- **What can an agency charge for providing copies
(actual cost – Crawford Superior Ct decision)**
- **What can an agency charge for inspection**
- **What does "promptly" mean and what needs to be included in a denial**
- **Ombudsperson (HGO wanted to explore this last year)**
- **Reorganization of language to make is cleaner and easier to find and understand**

I want to thank this committee for your interest in this concept and in improving open government. I look forward to seeing your work on this bill.