

Ethics Commission Comments – HGO - 03.28.2017
By Secretary of State Jim Condos

- Thank you for the opportunity to testify on an issue I believe is of great importance to Vermonters' trust in their government – an independent ethics commission.
- As an advocate for transparency in government, I am convinced it is time for Vermont to join the 47 other states in creating a body to set standards and oversee ethics in state government.
- Let me begin by saying, by and large, we are served well by our dedicated public servants – at the state, and local levels of gov't.
- The vast majority of our elected state and local officials are trustworthy, dedicated and passionate individuals who want to do the right thing.
- However, corruption does exist, and in small doses it can be just as corrosive to our democracy as any prominent scandal, undermining the public trust.
- Vermonters deserve good government – and the only way that can happen is if the public has access to an open, transparent government.
- I believe the time has come when VT must enact clear laws regarding ethics, conflicts of interest and financial disclosure.
- Three pillars are needed:
 - Independence
 - Authority
 - Resources
- I am pleased to see the Senate pass an ethics bill with important steps forward on the revolving door, financial disclosure and pay-to-play provisions, but I fear it does not go far enough.
- The commission they propose is not independent, it does not have enforcement authority and is not adequately resourced.

- The Senate proposal as crafted lacks teeth and without some small investment in resources, it is destined to fail.
- The 2012 and 2015 Center for Public Integrity rankings has VT with an overall grade of D+ and D- respectively <http://www.publicintegrity.org/>

	<u>2012</u>	<u>2015</u>
○ Redistricting	A	
○ Internal Auditing	A	C-
○ Procurement	B	C-
○ State Budget Processes	B-	A
○ Political Financing	B-	B
○ Lobbyist Disclosure	B-	C-
○ State Pension Fund Mgt	B-	D-
○ State Insurance Comm.	D+	
○ Public Access to Info	D+	F
○ State Civil Service Mgt	D+	F
○ Executive Accountability	D-	F
○ Ethics Enforcement	F	F
○ Legislative Accountability	F	F
○ Judicial Accountability	F	F

- Vermont is consistently toward the bottom of many state rankings when it comes to government transparency, accountability and integrity.
- All Northeast States – ME, MA, NH, RI, CT, NY, NJ, PA except VT have an Ethics Commission

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- VT should create an INDEPENDENT Ethics Commission
 - The Commission must have the AUTHORITY to INVESTIGATE, SUBPOENA and ENFORCE
 - The Commission should at the very least have a FULL TIME executive director and two additional staff to support administration, education, investigation and prosecution.

- **Those who oppose an ethics commission talk about it:**
 - **being too expensive OR**
 - **I suggest that we simply cannot afford NOT to invest in an ethics commission.**
 - **It will pay for itself by preventing corruption, conflicts, and increased accountability while improving public trust.**
 - **VT is so small and we know everyone**
 - **Corruption can start small before leading to bigger issues**
 - **Sometimes the issues seem benign**
- **Let me end by saying again, we are generally well served by our dedicated public servants.**
- **But we see the examples of conflicts and ethical dilemmas every day.**
- **We hear the complaints from our citizens and we have a statewide perspective few people can appreciate. Chris will speak briefly to that.**
- **Thank you for your time today and for the careful consideration I know you will give this very important subject.**