

Miscellaneous Tax Bill section 5403 ASSESSMENT DISTRICTS

This bill is active in Ways and Means, and VALA testimony is scheduled for Thursday at 2:30, Randy Viens and Camilla Roberts will testify. Todd LeBlanc provided a print out of the specific language separated out by lines, with underlined emphasis on certain wording for our attention. The group went through the bill line by line, with discussion, clarifications, concerns, lots of "what if", weighing the opportunities it offers and the potential problems.

To summarize the discussion:

- the bill as written causes confusion. Clarification and more study is needed to be functional.
- Components a) through e) are an opportunity that some towns would find sensible, but certainly not all towns or districts. This MUST remain an option, NOT a mandate.
- Component f) Consolidated assessment districts should be dropped. There are too many questions as to the responsibilities of individual towns in a consolidated assessment district; for example....where would land and assessment records be kept (there is so much more than a grand list involved here), how does the budget for operating and staff work between the towns and who writes the paychecks, who revises bills if there is no Lister in town, and more. There are loopholes between 2) and 6) depending on how the language is interpreted.
- Transition would be necessary to bring a set of towns to the same level of appraisal. The "written guidance" mentioned in (b) is the only hint of a transition plan, but seems not to really speak of that challenge. Towns with wide variance in assessment methods, CAMA programs, and overdue reappraisals next to recent reappraisals will require a substantial transition period for this to work. Agreements among towns would be needed, a complex process in itself.
- What happens when another town wants to join a pre-existing assessment district before the five year votes are up for the others? Or a town wants out, but others want to continue? Does the Commissioner have to approve each reconfiguration?
- There are many ways to improve assessment, the sales study and Equalization process that may make this bill unnecessary. Is a layer of complication being created here that is not needed?
- There are examples now of municipalities that share or coordinate functions. For example, The Unorganized Gores, assessment professionals that work in multiple towns, and sales data from beyond a town boundary that can be included in reappraisals and a sales study to improve accuracy. If this can be done now, why do we need this bill?
- There is considerable worry that while this would be a voted option for towns now, it will swiftly become a mandate for consolidated assessment districts. There is ample precedent for loss of local control.
- Vermont towns are highly diverse in terms of what would fit well to accomplish equity by being combined for assessment purposes. As long as merging for assessment remains optional there is an opportunity for some towns to gain efficiencies, a broader base of data for CLA to be more stable, and expertise could be more available when shared as a resource. However, if this were to become a mandate, the towns that do not fit together well would struggle and tensions would rise regarding loss of control around equity.