

Good morning. My name is Bret Hamilton. My wife Melissa and I are owners and founders of Stone Corral Brewery, Restaurant and Taproom in lovely Richmond, Vermont (just 2 miles off Exit 11 if you are headed toward Burlington!) Our business employs our two sons, plus five other full time and 10 part-time employees, whom we regard as extended family.

In early 2015, we began searching for a distributor that could represent our brewery across Vermont and help us grow. The company we finally selected had a reputation for integrity and professionalism, and we were able to negotiate a contract agreement with them that was satisfactory to both parties. Most notably, the owner of the distribution company agreed not to hold our fledgling company hostage to franchise law in the event that things did not work out to our mutual benefit.

Fast forward two years later to the spring of 2017, and it was obvious that our goals were no longer in alignment with those of our distributor. Our product was no longer being represented in the market the way we wanted it to be, and we felt we could be growing much faster. So, it was time for us to take back our brand and start our own distribution company.

However, we had since learned that because of franchise law, our contract agreement with the distributor meant nothing in the eyes of the State. This was a frightening situation for us, being completely at the mercy of another company to sell a locally made product in an industry where local means everything, and having no real option for timely legal recourse to remedy any shortcomings. The possibility of going bankrupt before the situation resolved loomed large.

In the end, we did not have to worry, because the owner of that distribution company kept his promise to us. We were able to part ways amicably, and today each of us carries on our business and thrives separately.

My point is this: The only reason this story has a happy ending, rather than ending a nasty court battle or worse, with the bankruptcy of our small, Vermont business, is because of the decency of one man to keep his word. Melissa and I are grateful to that man, Mr. David Farrell. He confirmed our very first assessment – that he is a man of integrity and professionalism.

Unfortunately, people come and go, but legislation lasts for generations. Vermont brewers should not be held to the mercy of the decency of a single individual to waive the privileges granted under franchise law for the success or failure of their businesses.

Please change Vermont Title 7 so that contracts between companies have legal bearing without the interference of outdated, anticompetitive, and oppressive franchise laws. I do not ask this for our company, because we were able to get what we needed to grow and thrive. I ask this for all the other Vermont family breweries that come after us with a dream of crafting a locally made product, and a desire to sell it in a free and competitive local marketplace.

Thank you for your time.