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## **Opinion Editorial**

### **Opening the Doors of Government: Vermont Needs an Ombudsman**

*By Jim Condos, Vermont's Secretary of State*

I take my role in state government seriously. I am honored to have been elected by Vermonters to serve as Secretary of State. 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 government accountability and 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 are providing 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: we can witness how decisions in government are being made, review and sometimes criticize those decisions, and get nearly unfettered access to the documents created by state government. 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're unlikely 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 a resource to turn to for appeals or enforcement of appropriate requests.

**The time has come for Vermont to create an Open Government Ombudsman with the authority to make decisions about contested public records requests and open meeting violations.**

A state Ombudsman 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.

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 see what a difference an Ombudsman 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 about more than enforcement. An Ombudsman could also assist in providing education and training to government officials about how to comply with public records requests and the open meeting law.

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.

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 that is to meet and 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 Ombudsman is the key.

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