

**Sandra Vitzthum, architect and representative for AIA-VT**

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**Testimony for House Committee on General, Housing and Military Affairs on S.163**

*May 2, 2019*

I have been a self-employed architect for twenty five years, mostly residential, with the opportunity to build in many states on the east coast. Building codes and policy have always interested me; I currently serve Build Safe Vermont as their past president and the Vermont chapter of the American Institute of Architects' policy committee. I am here today on my own, representing neither group. I have been asked to share the position statement of AIA-VT regarding this bill, however. Further, I served for several years as a mediator of construction disputes. And for about ten years I taught architectural design and building practices at a couple of different universities. With your permission, I would like to speak briefly from the perspectives of architect, mediator, and educator -- telling one anecdote for each.

I'd like to start with a mediation story. About ten years ago, a young single woman put all of her savings and took a mortgage in a small home in Burlington. She borrowed the maximum of her capacity to replace its windows, buying vinyl ones to save money. They cost \$10,000. She then hired a carpenter from an ad; he installed the windows. But then he grew angry with her and slashed all of the windows. They were not repairable. She had no money to buy new windows; she filed in small claims court to recover the maximum allowed of \$5,000. It turned out that the man was an ex-convict and was judgment proof. She felt so lucky that she wasn't attacked that day; she never would have hired the man if she had known his history.

The next story is of my current project being built in Greensboro by an incredible pair of men in their forties. They both went to vocational school and have built more than thirty houses of high quality. My project is the first project they are certifying to meet the Residential Building Energy Standards although it has been law for ten years. We had a blower door test a couple of weeks ago and the house passed incredibly well – 1 air exchange per hour where 3 is maximum – which reflects how carefully they sealed all surfaces. But they had never seen the certification form (which is required) nor the RBES handbook. They have no idea what R-values or ventilation are now required. This is not because they are careless. They simply have not been informed, ever, about the RBES. They have a registered business, they frequent the lumberyard, yet they have not been reached. Now I need to share something very personal: we tried for the first time a new insulation in this house (Roxul). We were all used to closed cell spray foam but wanted this house to be vermin and fire resistant. Just as sheetrock started, Dave noticed water leaking out from the inside of the walls. It turned out that ice had formed between the insulation and sheathing; if this had not been addressed, the house would have developed terrible mold problems and probably would have affected the health of the inhabitants. Efficiency Vermont was a huge help, and the walls were remediated before construction continued. But this could have easily happened – and may be happening – to anyone. Materials and methods now change so often that the State needs a way to reach contractors.

This leads to my third topic, education. S.163 is carefully crafted, and I love its voluntary certification. This will allow homeowners and other contractors know, in one handy, central place, what training an individual or business has. The energy code is clearly an important topic. My passion is historic preservation. In Montpelier alone, 80% of houses are historic. They have

“issues” of age: drystone foundations, leaky windows, failing plaster. S.163 gives contractors an opportunity to take courses from a certifying institution, such as the Preservation Education Institute in Windsor. I have seen numerous old farmhouses where the basements were improperly insulated and subsequently failed. The cost to repair improper work can be prohibitive, leaving the homeowner totally stuck. Historic integrity is understandably a lower priority than homeowners, but I would suggest that Vermont’s historic villages and farmscapes are an economic asset that benefits us all to preserve.

In closing, I am including a list of just a few of the certifying institutions that might make great partners with the State of Vermont and the certifications they provide.

Building Performance Institute

<http://www.bpi.org/certified-professionals>

- Infiltration and Duct Leakage
- Air Leakage Control Installer
- AC/Heat Pump Professional
- Building Analyst
- Envelope Professional
- Heating Professional
- Crew Leader
- Energy Auditor
- Quality Control Inspector
- Retrofit Installer Technician
- Healthy Home Evaluator

Efficiency Vermont

- Efficiency Excellence Network (EEN) membership

USGBC

- LEED AP Associate
- LEED AP homes

NAHB

- Certified Aging in Place Specialist
- Certified Graduate Builder
- Certified Graduate Remodeller
- Certified Green Professional
- Graduate Master Builder
- Graduate Master Remodeller
- Housing Credit Certified Professional
- Master Certified Green Professional

Historic Windsor/Preservation Education Institute

- Preservation Skills and Technology Certificate Program

National Tile Contractors Association

<https://www.tile-assn.com/>

- Certified Tile Installer
- Advanced Certified Tile Installer