

TO: Members of the House Government Operations Committee

FROM: Charles Storrow, Leonine Public Affairs, LLP, on behalf of Connecticut Attorneys Title Insurance Corporation

CC: Karen Horn, Vermont League of Cities and Towns
Carol Dawes, Barre City Clerk/ VT Municipal Clerks & Treasurers Assoc.
Teri Corsones, Executive Director, Vermont Bar Association
Chris D'Elia, Vermont Bankers Association

SUBJECT: S.349/Appropriation of a Sum of Money for the Purpose of Digitizing Municipal Land Records

DATE: June 15, 2020

Due to the COVID emergency and the Governor's "stay safe/stay home" order, the ability to access the state's 251 municipal land records offices has been severely circumscribed. Many municipal clerk's offices are closed or are open only on a very limited basis. As a result, it has been very difficult for Vermonters and others to engage in real estate transactions, whether it be selling or buying Vermont real estate or refinancing their mortgages, as those transactions invariably require an in-person examination of a municipality's land records. To overcome this problem, it is necessary that all of the land records in the state be digitized and made accessible online.

On behalf of my client Connecticut Attorneys Title Insurance Corporation, I am part of a group of stakeholders consisting of representatives of VLCT, the VT Municipal Clerks and Treasurers Association, the VT Bar Association, the VT Bankers Association and the VT Realtor's Association that is working towards the goal of getting all municipal land records digitized and online. The Senate Government Operations Committee has requested this undertaking per the accompanying email from Senator White. Tanya Marshall from the Secretary of State's office is facilitating meetings of this group.

A number of Vermont municipalities already have online land records, with various start dates. The stakeholder group's thinking is that what should be done first is provide funding to those other municipalities that do not have their land records online. The goal would be to get records online on a prospective basis (e.g., have documents filed for recording scanned and uploaded to an online accessible database on a going forward basis) and, in order to be meaningful, also get records that have been filed in the land records going back to at least 1980 scanned, uploaded and accessible online. At this point we estimate that it would cost \$18 million to get towns online on a prospective basis and for getting land records going back to 1980 digitized and online.

The group compiled survey results about costs from over 150 responding municipality clerks and the group obtained written cost estimates from third party vendors (many of whom have established relationships with some municipal clerks). We estimate that it will cost \$18 million to achieve the goal described above.

I am therefore writing to you to propose that S.349, which will provide monetary aid to municipalities for their COVID related expenses, be amended to include an additional \$18 million to be appropriated to the Agency of Administration for it to then provide grants to the towns for the purpose of paying for the costs of getting their land records online, as described above.

I would be happy to speak to the Committee about this proposal. Please note that I am copying the members of the stakeholder group's "legislative sub-group" on this memorandum and I am sure they would be willing to speak to the committee, too.