

Dear members of the Vermont legislature:

My name is Gilberto Diaz Santos, and I am a Vermonter from Havana, Cuba....Yes. A flat-lander, but someone who has found a new home here in Montpelier.

Like many others not born in the United States, I came here to secure a better future for our family. Why Vermont?, a typical question I've heard so many times. To make a long story short I would say that, in the early 90s, I met in Havana a couple from Plainfield and was fascinated to hear from them that Vermonters wouldn't lock their doors...To me, that said a lot about our state and its people.

Unfortunately, they did not live to see me here; Jean passed barely 4 days before my fist stop at Highgate Springs in September 2015. My family would join me eight months later. I would tell them that everything would be fine and of the countless times I had heard the word "Welcome". From very professional border security agents, from the staff in state or medical offices, from the farmers in the Saturday market, from the local bus drivers or from commuters on the Montpelier-Burlington link, from the many new acquaintances and friends I made during the 5 months I worked every business day as a volunteer in the Meals on Wheel program at the Montpelier Senior Activity Center, or from my employers and co-workers at CVMC, UVM and CCV.

So, instead of heading to South Florida where most Cubans go, where we have relatives and friends, where we could enjoy a warm weather and swim

on sandy beaches, or speak our mother tongue, we chose, as Robert Frost would say, “the road less traveled by”. And while we struggle a bit with the cold winters, just as you all do as well, we are happy we came to this state where among many other good things which you know better than we do, we can meet the most senior US senator at Shaws or see our congressman ride close to our seat on the Montpelier-Burlington link.

My wife and I came to do hard work, and are fortunate to have been offered jobs in Vermont’s flagships: the National Life Group, UVM, and CCV. We are also proud of our 16-year-old daughter’s education at both Montpelier Main Street Middle School and Montpelier High School. We are truly and greatly indebted to all her teachers, advisors, principals and new classmates and their parents for supporting her in transitioning to a whole different educational context.

In sum, whenever we are returning from a road trip and cross state or country lines, we feel a special joy and pride to read the green and white sign “Welcome to Vermont”.

One thing we have always understood is that in moving to the United States we would not expect to be on equal footing as those born on this land or those who have become New Americans. So, it has never been on our horizons to be able to vote before traveling the full path of citizenship. But, this petition to allow legal residents of Montpelier to vote on certain local issues is another truly revealing fact about the nature and quality of Vermonters. This is a petition supported by two thirds of our neighbors and

I'm sure others will be willing to say yes, if they would know a little bit more about who will be enabled to have full participation in the decisions of our city.

In the last few months, I have heard among the arguments in favor that legal residents use our city's infrastructure, send kids to school, have business or pay taxes. While my family agrees that those reasons are true and strong, we believe that there is one more at the very top, and it is our sense of identity and the feeling of giving back to the community which welcomed us.

Since we've been here for less than four years, we might not be the best non-US citizens of Montpelier to make a strong case for this petition. But think of all those who chose our city to restart anew and have been here for the greatest part of their lives, even when they might have different and complex reasons for not becoming American citizens. The fact is that this is our home, and being able to vote is another way of contributing to our community rather than benefitting from living here. While it is undeniable that voting is a right, we also and mainly see it as a civic duty.

I, therefore, urge you to cast your vote in favor of the proposed charter change. We can all be convinced that this will be proudly remembered by Vermonters today and in the years to come.

Thank you very much.