

BTVGOP

To: Vermont House Committee on Government Operations
From: Christopher-Aaron P Felker, Chairman Burlington Republican Party
Re: Burlington Charter Change regarding Prostitution
Date: April 1, 2022
Pages: 3

Good morning Representatives,

I am presenting testimony today in opposition the the Burlington Charter Change stripping the municipality of authority to restrain and curtail the exploitation of vulnerable communities, especially women, through prostitution.

I first learned of this Charter Change proposal on prostitution late in 2021 when I was presenting testimony on another matter to the Burlington Charter Change Committee. During that meeting I learned from Burlington Councilor Freeman that she was actively coordinating with Representative Selene Colburn on the language of this Charter Change to be run parallel to Ms Colburn's efforts to decriminalize prostitution at the state level.

Throughout this process I have listened to many survivors of sexual exploitation, and human trafficking who expressed near uniform opposition to this proposed charter change on prostitution. Their stories were heart wrenching to listen to. Their experiences with human traffickers, pimps & johns were nothing short of brutal exploitation and abject abuse. They were treated as a human commodity to be bought

and sold to whomever sought out the power to use and discard them. They warned repeatedly that because decriminalization is essentially defacto legalization of prostitution, and that even the perception of a governmental “hands off approach” to prostitution will cause a supply & demand economic effect resulting in increased demand for so called “sex workers” and prostitutes. The increased demand translates into an economic push to increase supply of “sex workers” and prostitutes through human trafficking.

I’ve heard repeatedly it is impossible to remove human trafficking from prostitution because of how deeply dependent and intertwined the two concepts are upon each other. Thus any move by our governments to arrogantly legitimize prostitution also serves to shield , empower and embolden the human traffickers, pimps, and johns who exploit and abuse these women and vulnerable communities.

Throughout this entire process I heard City Councilors and the Weinberger administration profess that this charter change wont change anything because prostitution is a state crime which, is suppose to be prosecuted by our State’s Attorney Sarah George. However, Ms George’s office routinely declines to prosecute these cases.

During the hours of testimony Burlington City Council received in opposition to this charter change many opponents pleaded with councilors that if they found the current language offensive to amend the language to be more contemporary and not to strike it altogether. Burlington City Councilors did express interest in exploring an amended language, but they relented when informed by the City Attorney that would delay the process. A question that begs to be answered is: If this charter change doesn’t change anything then why has there been such pressure to push this through so rapidly?

Now, while one would expect that conservatives would assume a posture in opposition to governmental efforts to legitimize prostitution. It is important to note that while City Council and the administration professed that they didn’t believe that this charter

change would lead to decriminalization of prostitution- the proponents of this change, including Representative Colburn, proudly boasted that she does “support the full decriminalization” of prostitution in the state of Vermont and this is one of the first steps to achieve that goal. This confession didn’t go unnoticed as Councilor Joan Shannon highlighted during the deliberation that it gave her great cause for concern.

The truth of the matter, I feel, is that the Burlingtonians have been deceived as to the scope and magnitude of the unintended consequences of this reform. I ask the representatives, senators and Governor Scott to reject this proposed Charter Change on prostitution and allow Burlington City Council the time and opportunity to reconsider amending the City Charter language to ensure that our recklessness does not result in the further subjugation, exploitation and abuse of women and vulnerable communities here in Vermont.

Sincerely,
Christopher-Aaron P Felker
Chairman, Burlington Republican Party