



southburlington

VERMONT

Testimony to House Committee on Government Operations

S.181

April 27, 2022

Jessie Baker, City Manager

Good morning, Madame Chair and the Committee. My name is Jessie Baker and I have the privilege of serving as the City Manager for the City of South Burlington and the Board President for the Vermont League of Cities and Towns. Over my career in municipal government in Vermont, I've also served the cities of Montpelier and Winooski.

I'm here this morning to encourage you to support S.181 "An act relating to authorizing miscellaneous regulatory authority for municipal governments." I believe that now more than ever, modernizing regulatory authorities for our cities and towns will empower communities, free up critical time for the Legislature, and further to partnership between state and local government.

In my experience, during the pandemic, state government, the legislature, and municipal governments came together to partner to serve all Vermonters – our shared constituents. We partnered on locating testing sites, getting much needed aid out to our residents, and providing new virtual participation methods and voting tools to further our democracy. During these years, it has been such a privilege to see Vermonters and government officials come together to best support our neighbors.

I believe that S.181 is a great step forward in this partnership to serve Vermonters and empower local communities to come together to lead. Additionally, it is the culmination of years of work and discussion on local governance that provides an elegant solution through the amendment of Title 24.

Although there are a number of sections I could highlight to show the importance to cities and towns, there is one I'd like to specifically highlight that would be of assistance to South Burlington and other communities.

Section 44-60 enables a community to change the number of members of Development Review Boards. This ability for a community to have conversations about local engagement and regulation is critical to how communities large and small respond nimbly to their local needs. For example, in South Burlington, our seven-member Development Review Board in the last four months has reviewed:

- a 130,000 ft² manufacturing plant for the innovative OnLogic company to expand
- 94 new homes (79 of which are perpetually affordable) at our new O'Brien Farm neighborhood

- 47 new homes along Spear Street
- a mixed-use building (commercial and 9 new homes) along Shelburne Road
- a new 84,000 ft² medical building for UVM-Medical Center at Tilley Drive
- and, of course, yesterday they issued their decision to allow Beta Air to move forward with their manufacturing facility at the Burlington International Airport

These are dedicated volunteers who work extremely hard. When there is one vacancy – as there recently was – and folks have busy schedules – it can be challenging to maintain quorums needed to ensure multi-phased projects are seen through review. This can, at times, create hardships for companies looking to build or expand in Vermont, can slow down the development of much needed housing, and can add permitting and construction costs to projects instead of investing those funds into job creation and new homes.

We recently had three qualified candidates step forward to serve with one vacancy available. With this authority to expand this Board to nine (for example) more of our community could be engaged, with more folks to shoulder the critical regulatory authorities. However, communities of different sizes may choose other options. Giving towns and cities the ability to self-govern these types of regulatory bodies allows them to self-realize what is best for them.

And, of course, if adopted, these changes would still require local public votes – thereby ensuring that the community is educated and engaged in important conversations about self-governance.

I sincerely appreciate the Committee's willingness to consider testimony on S.181. And again, I think these amendments to Title 24 demonstrate a continued commitment to partnership between the State and municipalities to best serve our shared constituents. Thank you.

Contact Information

Jessie Baker, City Manager

jbaker@southburlingtonvt.gov

(802) 846-4100