

S.159

Introduced by Senators Hardy, Clarkson, Norris, Vyhovsky, Watson and White

Referred to Committee on Government Operations

Date: January 3, 2024

Subject: Municipal and county government; structure of county governance

Statement of purpose of bill as introduced: This bill proposes to create a study committee that shall examine how to best strengthen county-level government in Vermont to enhance and optimize public safety, tax collection, and resource allocation.

~~An act relating to the County Governance Study Committee~~

An act relating to the County and Regional Governance Study Committee

It is hereby enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Vermont:

~~Sec. 1. COUNTY GOVERNANCE; STUDY COMMITTEE; REPORT~~

~~(a) Creation. There is created the County Governance Study Committee to enhance and optimize public safety; regional collaboration and planning; efficient, equitable, and transparent public resource allocation; and effective regional public services for individuals and municipalities.~~

~~(b) Membership. The Committee shall be composed of the following members:~~

~~(1) two current members of the House of Representatives, the first of which shall be the Chair of the House Committee on Government Operations~~

1 and Military Affairs, and the second of which shall be from a different

2 political party and appointed by the Speaker of the House;

3 (2) two current members of the Senate, the first of which shall be the
4 Chair of the Senate Committee on Government Operations, and the second of
5 which shall be from a different political party and appointed by the Committee
6 on Committees;

7 (3) two members, appointed by the Department of State's Attorneys and
8 Sheriffs, the first of which shall be a current sheriff, and the second shall be a
9 current State's Attorney;

10 (4) one member of a postsecondary educational institution located in
11 Vermont who has expertise in state and local government, appointed by the
12 Secretary of State;

13 (5) one member, appointed by the Vermont Association of County
14 Judges;

15 (6) one member, appointed by the Vermont Association of Planning and
16 Development Agencies;

17 (7) one member, appointed by the Vermont Bond Bank;

18 (8) one member, appointed by the Vermont Municipal Clerks' and
19 Treasurers' Association;

20 (9) one member, appointed by the Vermont League of Cities and Towns;

21 and

1 ~~(10) one member of the Vermont Regional Development Corporations~~
2 appointed by the Secretary of Commerce and Community Development.

3 (c) Powers and duties. The Committee shall study and make
4 recommendations to the General Assembly on how to improve the structure
5 and organization of county government, including the following items:

6 (1) enhancement and optimization of public safety;

7 (2) enhancement of regional collaboration and planning;

8 (3) efficient, equitable, and transparent allocation of public resources;

9 (4) promotion of effective regional public services for individuals and
10 municipalities;

11 (5) clarification of the role and oversight of elected county officials and
12 their departments;

13 (6) reduction of duplicated municipal services;

14 (7) balance of availability and cost of services across municipalities in
15 each county; and

16 (8) review of county government structures in other states.

17 (d) Assistance. The Committee shall have the administrative, technical,
18 and legal assistance of the Office of Legislative Operations, the Office of
19 Legislative Counsel, and the Joint Fiscal Office.

20 (e) Report. On or before November 1, 2025, the Committee shall report to
21 the House Committee on Government Operations and Military Affairs and the

1 ~~Senate Committee on Government Operations with its findings and any~~
2 recommendations for legislative action.

3 (f) Meetings.

4 (1) A Committee member from the House of Representatives appointed
5 by the Speaker of the House shall call the first meeting of the Committee to
6 occur on or before September 1, 2024.

7 (2) The Committee shall be co-chaired by the Chair of the House
8 Committee on Government Operations and Military Affairs and the Chair of
9 the Senate Committee on Government Operations.

10 (3) A majority of the membership shall constitute a quorum.

11 (4) The Committee shall cease to exist on July 1, 2026.

12 (g) Compensation and reimbursement.

13 (1) For attendance at meetings during adjournment of the General
14 Assembly, a legislative member of the Committee serving in the member's
15 capacity as a legislator shall be entitled to per diem compensation and
16 reimbursement of expenses pursuant to 2 V.S.A. § 23 for not more than
17 10 meetings. These payments shall be made from monies appropriated to the
18 General Assembly.

19 (2) Other members of the Committee who are not paid for their services
20 by the organization that the member is representing on the Committee shall be
21 entitled to per diem compensation and reimbursement of expenses as permitted

1 ~~under 32 V.S.A. § 1010 for not more than 10 meetings. These payments shall~~
2 ~~be made from monies appropriated to the General Assembly.~~

3 ~~(h) Appropriation for Committee consulting. The sum of \$50,000.00 is~~
4 ~~appropriated to the Committee from the General Fund in fiscal year 2025 to~~
5 ~~contract with one or more consultants to assist with research, preparation of~~
6 ~~the report, and any other assistance with the Committee's work deemed~~
7 ~~necessary by the Committee.~~

8 Sec. 2. EFFECTIVE DATE

9 ~~This act shall take effect on passage.~~

*Sec. 1. COUNTY AND REGIONAL GOVERNANCE STUDY
COMMITTEE; REPORT*

*(a) Creation. There is created the County and Regional Governance Study
Committee to address local government capacity challenges, enhance and
optimize public safety, regional collaboration and planning, efficient,
equitable, and transparent public resource allocation, and effective regional
public services for individuals and municipalities.*

*(b) Membership. The Committee shall be, to the extent possible, composed
of members from geographically diverse regions of the State. The Committee
shall be composed of the following members:*

*(1) three current members of the House of Representatives, who shall
not all be from the same political party, the first of whom shall be the Chair of
the House Committee on Government Operations and Military Affairs, and the
second and third of whom shall be appointed by the Speaker of the House; and*

*(2) three current members of the Senate, who shall not all be from the
same political party, the first of whom shall be the Chair of the Senate
Committee on Government Operations, and the second and third of whom
shall be appointed by the Committee on Committees.*

(c) Powers and duties.

(1) The Committee shall study and make recommendations to the General Assembly on how to improve the structure and organization of county and regional government, including:

(A) enhancement and optimization of public safety;

(B) enhancement of regional collaboration and planning;

(C) efficient, equitable, and transparent allocation of public resources;

(D) promotion of effective regional public services for individuals and municipalities;

(E) clarification of the role and oversight of elected county officials and their departments;

(F) reduction of duplicated public services and promotion of opportunities for intermunicipal collaboration;

(G) balance of availability and cost of services across municipalities in each county;

(H) mechanisms of county and regional government structures in other states; and

(I) impact of climate change and resiliency on the maintenance of public infrastructure, delivery of regional government services, and coordination of regional emergency planning.

(2) The Committee may, through the Joint Fiscal Office, contract with one or more consultants to assist with research, preparation of the report, and any other assistance with the Committee's work deemed necessary by the Committee.

(d) Assistance. The Committee shall have the administrative, technical, and legal assistance of the Office of Legislative Operations, the Office of Legislative Counsel, and the Joint Fiscal Office.

(e) Report. On or before November 1, 2025, the Committee shall report to the House Committee on Government Operations and Military Affairs and the Senate Committee on Government Operations with its findings and any recommendations for legislative action.

(f) Meetings.

(1) The Chair of the Senate Committee on Government Operations shall call the first meeting of the Committee to occur on or before September 1, 2024.

(2) The Committee shall be co-chaired by the Chair of the House Committee on Government Operations and Military Affairs and the Chair of the Senate Committee on Government Operations.

(3) A majority of the membership shall constitute a quorum.

(4) The Committee shall cease to exist on July 1, 2026.

(g) Compensation and reimbursement. For attendance at meetings during adjournment of the General Assembly, a legislative member of the Committee serving in the member's capacity as a legislator shall be entitled to per diem compensation and reimbursement of expenses pursuant to 2 V.S.A. § 23 for not more than 10 meetings. These payments shall be made from monies appropriated to the General Assembly.

~~(4) Appropriation for consulting. The sum of \$50,000.00 is appropriated to the Joint Fiscal Office from the General Fund in fiscal year 2025 to contract with one or more consultants to assist with research, preparation of the report, and any other assistance with the Committee's work deemed necessary by the Committee.~~

Sec. 2. COUNTY AND REGIONAL GOVERNANCE TECHNICAL ADVICE

(a) On or before September 1, 2024, the Executive Director of the Vermont Bond Bank, shall convene the first meeting of a County and Regional Governance Technical Advisory Group. The Technical Advisory Group shall analyze the subject matter being considered by the County and Regional Governance Study Committee and advise, assist, and provide recommendations to the Study Committee, specifically on the structure and organization of county and regional government. The Vermont Bond Bank shall participate in order to support improvements to local capacity.

(b) The following individuals and entities shall be invited to participate in the meeting or meetings described in this section:

(1) the Department of State's Attorneys and Sheriffs;

(2) the State Court Administrator;

(3) the Vermont Association of County Judges;

(4) the Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies;

(5) the Vermont Municipal Clerks' and Treasurers' Association;

(6) the Vermont League of Cities and Towns;

(7) the Vermont Regional Development Corporations;

(8) the Vermont School Boards Association;

(9) the Vermont Town and City Management Association; and

(10) other relevant stakeholders identified by the Technical Advisory Group.

(c) The Study Committee may at any time request advice from the Technical Advisory Group regarding issues relating to the structure and organization of county and regional government, which shall be provided by the Technical Advisory Group.

Sec. 3. FEDERAL DISASTER FUNDING FOR COUNTY AND REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS REPORT

On or before September 15, 2024, the Secretary of Administration, or designee, shall report to the County and Regional Governance Study Committee on federal funding opportunities resulting from the disaster declaration for the major flooding events of 2023 in the State, including the received federal funds, the status of pending applications for funding, and potential avenues for additional funds. The Secretary, or designee, shall provide an analysis of the impact of Vermont's lack of robust county or regional governance on the receipt of federal emergency funding.

Sec. 4. EFFECTIVE DATE

This act shall take effect on passage.