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April 6, 2023

Dear Vermont Legislature,

We, the Ferrisburgh Selectboard are writing to you to express opposition to the bill – H. 480 - switching control of local property tax assessments from communities to the Vermont Department of Taxes.

We believe that the loss of local people and knowledge in the appraisal process will lead to less fairness, more delays, and poorer access to the appeals process. We also believe that loss of local officials working for minimal compensation will cause the process to be more expensive and more cumbersome.

Currently, a permit issued at the local level triggers a visit from the Town Listers to add the permitted improvements to the property tax card. With the State handling assessments would someone drive from Montpelier to perform this task or would the permitted improvements wait for the next reappraisal cycle?

Assessing from Montpelier will lead to more desktop work and less on-site work. A wealthy homeowner with a 2000 square foot home may completely remodel their home while a poorer family may simply bear another year of depreciation on their 2000 square foot home. How does a state-run process keep up with the true value of each of these homes without discriminating against the family of lesser means? These differences are best evaluated by local site visits.

The language in the bill citing national studies of property appraisals discriminating against people of color is completely out of order in Vermont legislation. First, education property taxes are based on the tax payer's income – a progressive feature absent in most other states. Second, if the legislature believes any class of people is being discriminated against they should have the matter investigated and make decisions based on factual information about Vermont.

The unprecedented run-up in property values triggered by the pandemic has caught all of us by surprise. It is certainly not the fault of local government. Why do we believe that the tax department would have been better equipped to handle it?

Additionally, the Vermont Department of Taxes is charged with the responsibility of collecting taxes. Giving them control of the other half of the equation, establishing the basis for property taxes is at least an appearance of conflict of interest.

We hear on an almost daily basis that the State is failing to follow its own regulations and procedures on many fronts – Department of Children and Family's appeals, nursing home follow-up inspections, and paving bids just to name a few. Asking the Tax Department to take on the tasks of 250 communities is certainly not going to work well so alternate approaches should be considered. These approaches should include:

1. Temporarily lowering the thresholds for triggering town-wide reappraisals.
2. Allowing communities to do partial reappraisals when categories of property fall below 85% of fair market value (an option that the new legislation would give to the Tax Department).

3. Assisting communities in organizing reappraisals in multi-town school districts to maintain equity in school funding.
4. Assisting communities in accessing qualified firms and individuals to conduct reappraisals.

Some combination of these tweaks to the system could help us weather the unprecedented increase in property values without dismantling a system that has worked for over 200 years.

Sincerely,

Ferrisburgh Selectboard



Clark Hinsdale, III



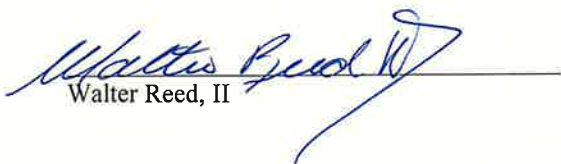
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