

## Testimony on H.875

Hello! Thanks for allowing me to submit testimony on Bill H.875 which attempts to establish a code of ethics for governing officials from the State level down to the rural municipality level. At the outset, I will say the same thing I said when I testified before the House Committee on Government and Military Affairs on this very bill. My opposition to this bill is not in any way, shape or form, an argument against the need for elected officials, at all levels of Vermont government, to be ethical.

However, there are already multiple resources in place in the State of Vermont that support the ethical behavior of elected officials. First off, the voters hold elected officials to the highest ethics throughout all level of governance in the State of Vermont. Voters have the option of voting an incumbent out of office at the next election. They also have a mechanism to recall an elected official. Voters have a vast array of options to contact State offices and file complaints about elected officials. These mechanisms are already in place in the State for concerned voters. So what exactly is the need for this bill.

The crux of this bill assumes that elected officials in rural communities do not know how to act ethically or govern ethically. Frankly, that is an insult to the countless people who step up to the plate and run for elected office because they want to support the community in which they live. Rural community elected officials are some of the finest citizens the State of Vermont has. They receive almost no money for what they do. They're already held to an ultra-high standard of scrutiny by local voters, and now this Bill and the Legislature feels the need to say to, especially rural communities, we don't think you know how to do your job ethically. Pshaw!

You cannot govern ethics. Elected officials are either ethical or not. No bill passed by the legislature; No document handed down by the State on ethics; No mandate from Montpelier on ethical behavior of elected officials will strengthen ethical behavior in municipal governance! I'd be interested to know; how many ethics violations have been filed against elected officials in Vermont municipalities in the last 5 years? Let's break that down further...how many ethics violations have been filed against elected city officials? And how many ethics violations have been filed against rural community officials? I suspect at the rural community level, very few; I would expect at the city level, maybe a few more; I would expect at the State level, most of all! If the State wants to hold governing officials in the State Capitol ethical, because you're genuinely concerned about the ethical behavior of your colleagues, I support that 100%! But allow municipalities to handle this on their own.

I was told by State Senator Ruth Hardy that H.875 was not targeted to "any one size of municipality or one area of the State". Oddly enough, a member of the House Committee on Government Affairs told me this bill was exactly an attempt to reign in what was perceived as unethical behavior in rural Town governance. Hmmm. I turned down an opportunity to testify via Zoom before this community because I was not given the assurance that equal time would be given to all those who testified. Why? Because when I testified before the House Committee on Government Affairs, the City of Colchester (who by the way also opposes this bill)

was given 50 of the 60 minutes available for testimony. So, when it came my turn, I was told I had only 5 minutes to testify., which meant no committee member could ask me questions on my viewpoint. Because your committee could not guarantee that all those testifying on Tuesday would get an equal amount of time, I refused to testify live and elected to submit my written thoughts.

The introduction of H.875 furthers my belief that State Government does not have a grasp on the challenges of rural government. I would invite any member of this committee, or any member of a State governing body, to come to my community so I can introduce you to some of the hardest working, community minded, and ETHICAL elected officials in our State. I've said it before, and I'll say it again: we don't need committees in Montpelier spending their time on bills that attempt to make elected officials in rural communities ethical. We already are. What we really need is a committee like this that reaches out to rural communities, comes to visit rural communities and does due diligence to understand the challenges and sacrifices elected officials make for their rural communities and ask "what funding can we provide to help your community prosper?"

I know many of my rural municipal colleagues (and the Vermont League of Cities and Towns) are against this bill. If it moves past your committee and the Legislature votes to adopt the bill, is the State prepared to come into rural communities, go against voter will, and remove an elected official from office because he or she refuse to comply with the requirements of this bill, based on their own ethics?

It's honorable that the State feels the need to shore up ethics in Vermont governance. I've got a great idea...why doesn't the State focus on elected officials at the State level and let the municipal governments in Vermont have the same privilege of focusing on ethics in our communities. No offense to State Government, but we'll do a much better job!

I thank you for your time and for considering my written testimony. I will happily meet with any member in person, on the phone, or on a virtual platform (such as Zoom) to answer any questions this body may have. Gary Briggs, Select Board Member, Lunenburg, Vermont