

April 18th, 2024

Re: H.875, An act relating to the State Ethics Commission and the State Code of Ethics

Respectfully submitted to the Senate Committee on Government Operations:

I am writing to add to the growing chorus of voices across the state that recognizes the immediate need to correct the unequal balance of power between municipal officials and the citizens they represent. Municipal ethics training and accountability is long overdue. I learned this year that Vermont has an existing state requirement for towns to adopt better conflict of interest policies. Even though my town has never done this, and has been out of compliance with this law since 2019, I would have thought I could trust my elected officials to act within certain boundaries. I was wrong.

In direct rebuttal to the legislative testimony provided by the League of Cities and Towns claiming that ethics training and following the law is too much of a burden for town officials, and that these people will quit, I'd like to answer: I doubt it, but if they do, great, and I hope so! The real burden is on the thousands of citizens in Vermont who have nowhere to turn when town officials abuse their power. Good riddance to any public servant who is unwilling to prioritize serving the public or the principles of democracy.

The League of Cities and Towns works for municipalities. But municipalities are made up of people who work for citizens. I am disappointed to hear testimony that pretends that the interests of elected officials are different and separate from the people they represent. Not only do town officials have significant immunity, they also have access to legal advice, guidance, and structures that support them staying in power. Citizens have nothing but the court system to uphold the rights they supposedly have. By the time something can be processed through the courts, most situations have ended long before, usually with the result that the citizen has nonetheless been stripped, in any practical sense, of the rights they thought they had. This process is extremely burdensome, expensive, time consuming, and people who are inclined to disregard the law know this very well. They rely on people deciding it just isn't worth it to fight. Voting people out of office is powerful—but provides absolutely no immediate help when a situation is unfolding in real time. And these situations can have significant consequences for people's property, democratic processes, and whole towns.

When we are facing exponentially mounting future challenges and when small towns are the backbone of the state, encouraging everyone who is afraid of a little ethics training to leave town government is the best move we can make. Ethical people everywhere are extremely frustrated, worried about the future, and will step up.

Establishing stronger municipal ethics guardrails is one of the best ways you can serve any and all of your constituents. Thank you for your work on this important bill.

Sarah Teel
Resident of Washington, VT