

To: Vermont House Committee on Commerce and Economic Development  
From: Michael Wood-Lewis, Co-Founder and CEO, Front Porch Forum  
Subject: **Testimony regarding S.71:** An act relating to consumer data privacy and online surveillance  
Date: April 29, 2026

## INTRODUCTION

Hello. My name is Michael Wood-Lewis. My wife, Valerie, and I settled in the South End of Burlington in the 1990s to raise our family, and we've been there ever since. I'm here today as the Co-Founder and CEO of Front Porch Forum to offer testimony regarding S.71 about data privacy and online surveillance.

While Front Porch Forum is nonpartisan, as a Vermont public benefit corporation, our social mission is baked right into our legal charter. That mission is to help neighbors connect and build more resilient communities across our state. While our business is nonpartisan, we are pro-local economy, pro-rule-of-law, and pro-democracy. So I feel obligated to speak up regarding this bill.

Thank you, Mr. Chair and Representatives, for focusing on this critical issue and allowing me this opportunity to address your committee. Spoiler alert: I am strongly in favor of reining in the great harms to Vermonters perpetrated by Big Tech. A *strong* version of this bill will NOT harm the business I represent. In fact, it will help protect us and slow down the real damages done by Big Tech billionaires.

## BACKGROUND

By way of background, my wife and I started [Front Porch Forum](#) as a small family-owned business 20 years ago this August. With four kids under the age of six at that moment, I'm not sure we were thinking very clearly about our timing to launch a business, but it was a labor of love to conceive of Front Porch Forum and bring it to life. We had struggles too, of course. Like many other Vermont small business owners, I worked 80-to-100-hour work weeks for years. As the business grew, we hired Vermonters to join our team. During tight times we took out a line of credit against our home to make sure we could always make payroll. We were all in.

Fast forward to today, 20 years later, and FPF's 31 employees serve every town and neighborhood in Vermont with its own online Forum, Community Calendar, and Business Directory. And all 250 of those digital spaces are networked, so Vermonters can tune into their own community, and they can branch out into adjacent areas as well. (For details see [FPF's 2025 Benefit Report](#).)

Among Vermont's 270,000 existing households, FPF has 250,000 active member accounts. This level of participation is unparalleled. And 97% of our members report that FPF is valuable to their towns. Also, 18,000 Vermont businesses and nonprofits have joined their local FPFs to better connect with their communities.

In short, our terrific team has built a thriving small business that serves as critical civic and economic infrastructure across Vermont. And we've done so by respecting our users' privacy, not by violating it.

## **THE HARMS**

The damage wrought by Big Tech is so varied and vast, it's hard to describe and harder to comprehend. But look at many of today's calamities, and Big Tech can be found accelerating the harm while siphoning billions of dollars out of local economies. For example, the loneliness epidemic, societal divisiveness, erosion of democracy, decaying journalism, ballooning mental health troubles, acts of public violence, small business closings, and more.

Leveraging its vast fortunes, Big Tech has hired some of the brightest minds in human psychology and related fields to discover what captures our attention the best, the fastest, the most reliably. And then they have operationalized that to keep us staring at our screens as long as possible every single day of our finite lives. They are well aware of the great harms this is causing to people, businesses, institutions -- our very democracy -- and they still want more.

A new book ([Attensity](#)) compares this Big Tech business model to fracking for natural gas or petroleum. The author calls it "human fracking." Big Tech injects toxic stuff into our minds at high pressure to extract value, and then leaves behind a terrible mess for someone else to deal with.

## **VERMONT'S RESPONSE**

So what will be Vermont's response in this moment? A reasonable response to petroleum fracking done irresponsibly is to pass strong regulations to prohibit the worst practices in order to protect people.

The same goes for the "human fracking" undertaken by Big Tech. They claim the sky will fall if the people push back through their elected government to put some basic protections in place to prohibit the most egregious and harmful practices. Hogwash.

I urge this committee, Mr. Chair and Representatives, to pass the *strongest* set of measures to protect Vermonters and Vermont businesses from the harmful practices of data brokers and Big Tech. I recognize that Big Tech is spending unprecedented sums of money to make folks think that up is down and no is yes – but the choice seems clear from where I sit. Either we side with Big Tech billionaires who want to siphon even more money out of Vermont -- harms be damned -- or we side with everyday Vermonters, our small businesses, our communities, our children.

**Please move ahead with the *strongest* possible version of this bill.** Thank you.