

Bill H.506

HOW

Hello everyone, I'm Karen Frost, thanks for the opportunity to speak with you today and **thank you** for the time and dedication you give as members of the Legislature. As I'm learning, it is no small thing!

I'd like to briefly explain why I'm here testifying before you, and then I'll do my best to answer your questions.

Last November I attended a Planning Commission meeting where I met Mat Citarella, a self-described "policy geek" who regularly attended Planning Commission, Development Review Board, and Select Board meetings. Having moved to Charlotte 40 years ago, now an "old timer", I was encouraged to meet a young resident so engaged in town affairs.

Mat and I realized we shared the same concern about the Home Act removing the ability of a rural town to guarantee all land-use regulation changes be put to a town wide vote. In fact, we had both written to our representative about it when the policy was under discussion in 2023, as did other members of our community.

Mat explained that we could try to restore the guarantee to a town-wide vote through the Charter process. As your legislative council commented after Shea's presentation of the bill, **"this is what charters are for."** Any town in Vermont has the authority to adopt a charter that can change state law for its community.

Recognizing that this process is an ambitious undertaking, and uses the time and resources of many people, we wanted to be sure enough other Charlotters felt it was important too.

I took advantage of the November election, knowing that Charlotte historically has a high voter turnout, stood outside town hall with my trusty clipboard, and talked to people. Did they know about this change? What did they think about

it? And did it matter to them? I did not influence opinion, I did not lead the witness, and I pretty quickly learned several things: They **did not** know about it, they were **not ok** with it, and they **did** think it mattered.

After two hours I tallied 38 opposed to the rule change, 1 in favor, and 2 undecideds. It was not only the numbers, but the strength of people's opinions that were very clear. It was enough for us to get to work on the Charter that's before you now.

It was a time-crunch to get the article on the ballot for Town Meeting in March, but within several weeks we had over 250 signatures, way more than the required 5% and we also received a lot of messages saying **thank you** for doing this, this is important! What stands out to me, having worked on other town issues, is how widespread the support is. It crosses all the usual boundaries that pop up: old or new residents, and people from across the political spectrum, from conservatives to progressives.

On March 4th, the article passed by Australian Ballot by more than a 2 to 1 margin: 694 in favor, 335 opposed.

WHY

So, **why** do the voters of Charlotte think this is so important?

There were several consistent themes we heard from voters, and I'll also share comments we received.

First: Civic engagement.

"It's one of the things that makes Vermont special. This engagement and participation fosters a strong sense of town stewardship and ownership among residents. It is crucial for us to democratically review, analyze, and vote on planning decisions made by our appointed boards."

“As a Charlotter, I want to preserve my right to civic engagement. Land Use Regulations affect us all in different ways and it’s important that we have a decision-making process that includes all residents.”

“My father introduced the first land use regulations to the town of Charlotte in the 1960’s. People get involved here!”

“In rural towns like ours, where making a difference seems possible, we need to strengthen civic engagement and voter participation, not do things that disenfranchise people, like taking away town-wide voting.”

Second: The power of the Select Board & Transparency in Government:

“The selectboard already appoints the members of the Planning Commission and the Development Review Board. As a result of this provision in the Home Act, they now also have the ability to pass regulations crafted by their own appointees without a town-wide vote. This sets the stage for conflicts of interest and could have detrimental consequences for the way policy is developed.”

“These are massive decisions. Having citizens involved engenders a deeper dive, a more thorough investigation and understanding, and a broader consensus.”

“For most people their home and property are their most valuable asset and they work very hard to get it, take care of it, and pay property taxes on it. Land Use regulations determine what you can do with your property, what your neighbor can do with theirs, and guides the future of development in our town. These decisions are too important to be left to the Selectboard alone.”

And the third was about the importance of building Consensus:

Quotes:

“How do we help people feel like they have a voice? The more people who vote, the more our collective decisions reflect the will of the people.”

“Local government belongs to the voter. Let the Selectboard rule then complain about it, or participate, get involved, and decide as a town.”

“The new language would allow motivated planning commissions and selectboards to push through sweeping changes to land use regulations without having to get that buy-in, which to me feels like a sacrifice of a core value.”

“A vote by a 5-member selectboard, (so hypothetically 3 people), is not going to result in the buy-in from the broader community on issues like zoning bylaws, that are instrumental to our town’s future.”

WHAT WE’RE DOING

In conclusion, many who live in Charlotte have young adult children, or elderly parents, or businesses looking for employees. We are all feeling the impact of the housing crunch.

Charlotte is a town where people do get involved, and for generations have worked hard to improve and be good custodians of our community and natural resources. Instead of disenfranchising Charlotte voters, we want to create more housing opportunities by harnessing the grass-roots ownership and problem solving that have built and nurtured the town assets we love. Like our children’s center, our senior center, our library, the grange hall, just to name a few.

*We recently changed the structure of our town planning department to streamline and simplify the permitting process.

*Our land use regulations are currently under review with guidance from the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission.

*A citizen group, on their own, has undertaken a mapping project to look at every parcel of land in town and really figure out where growth is possible, potentially bringing more people and the landowners into the process.

*Our Town Plan is up for revision next year, providing an opportunity to align the goals and vision for our town with today's realities.

This Charter is not about closing the doors to Charlotte. It is about retaining and growing civic engagement. It's about building on the values and years of hard work and commitment by so many that have created the town we love. It's about continuing to work to solve the issues facing our community by more of us, not fewer. It's about transparency in government. All with the intention of crafting the best possible outcomes for all. Thank you.