

*House Government Operations and Military Affairs*  
*February 3, 2025*  
*Vermont Public Records Act*

Good afternoon,

My name is Bridget Higdon. I am here today as the vice president of the Vermont Journalism Coalition, a new nonprofit dedicated to supporting and sustaining Vermont journalism.

Founded in June 2025, the VJC represents more than 40 newspapers, television stations and radio stations across the state.

I am also the publisher and editor of the Saint Albans Messenger, Essex Reporter, Milton Independent and Colchester Sun.

The VJC opposes the proposed changes to the Public Records Act as put forward by the Vermont League of Cities and Towns.

We believe the current public records act has served Vermonters and the media well by allowing relatively prompt access to public records.

But the legislative proposal from the VLCT would effectively create financial barriers to accessing public records and undermine the essential watchdog function of journalism in Vermont.

Extending the response time from 3 to 14 business days hampers timely reporting. Stories delayed by 14 days can lose relevance and public interest. And we all know how rumors and misinformation can spread in online forums and on social media.

Timely access to public records ensures Vermont journalists set the record straight as quickly as possible.

VLCT also asserts “vexatious requests” place an undue burden on municipal staff, and while we sympathize with this problem, please do not let a certain few ruin this essential public service for all Vermonters.

Any attempt to rewrite legislation as a result of those “vexatious requests” should require data collection in support. Gathering data from government entities, both large and small, about the number of vexatious records requests and the time required to respond to them, would seem an appropriate way to begin to evaluate the issue.

The cost of responding to records requests might also be evaluated by quantifying the current costs in terms of the number, type and time required to respond.

Please keep in mind any added fees for public records requests would create financial barriers for Vermont's small news organizations and for individual citizens.

Vermont's small town and county newspapers are proud of the effective working relationships we have with municipal staff across the state. Those relationships have been hard-earned over years of building trust and mutual respect.

The Vermont Journalism Coalition looks forward to working with this committee and the legislature as a whole to ensure those important relationships continue, and that Vermonters and the media, acting for and with them, continue to have access to public records in a timely and cost-effective way so that we all can be accurately informed about our communities.