Testimony to the House Committee on Ways and Means on a new draft of the Statewide Reappraisal Bill

Dear House Committee,

I want to express my sincere gratitude for the opportunity to testify and provide my honest feedback on the State Reappraisal Bill. It is an honor to be part of this hearing—thank you.

I have worked in the public sector for over 30 years, both in the United States and abroad. My background includes extensive experience in public education, technical support, web development, and graphic design. I hold a Master's degree in Applied Mathematics and Computer Science.

Taking on the Assessor role in Plymouth has required significant learning and training—a challenge I have embraced with dedication. I regularly participate in workshops and training provided by the Division of Property Valuation and Review. Last year, I earned the Vermont Property Valuation Assessor certification.

On Establishment of Regional Assessment Districts

I fully support the establishment of Regional Assessment Districts (RADs) and the professionalization of the lister's office. While the lister model once worked well for rural Vermont, today's properties are far more diverse. Modern property valuation is highly complex, requiring expertise in the real estate market, valuation methods, and proficiency with various reporting and analysis systems. The field also involves statistical and mathematical modeling, public relations, and on-site data collection. This bill will give listers and assessors the opportunity to demonstrate their professionalism, just like specialists in any other field.

The vision of establishing assessment districts and integrating proven practices is excellent. Regional districts will create a clear chain of command, where teams can support one another, fostering a sustainable and well-defined work environment.

There is a lot of emotional feedback regarding the perceived loss of local control. As I understand it, this primarily means that towns will no longer elect their listers. However, how many voters truly understand the complexities of a lister's job? To what extent does the current system function as a popularity contest rather than a merit-based hiring process? Additionally, the requirement for three qualified listers per town is simply not feasible for small municipalities. Many Vermont towns also have a significant number of second-homeowners who contribute to the tax base but have no say in the process. Moreover, municipalities still control key decisions, such as tax exemptions, through public referendums, and each town has a Board of Abatement to handle individual cases.

Property valuation is a science based on data. Like any scientific process, there is always a margin of error, and our job is to minimize that margin as much as possible. Across the state, we have enough talent to staff regional districts, but not enough to sustain the lister model in every municipality. Act 68 and the ongoing trend of towns eliminating their boards of listers in favor of assessor offices provide strong evidence of this shift.

The idea of creating standardized guidelines and procedures is outstanding, and I believe the PVR is already making significant progress in this area. They are also advancing a solid professional development track for listers and assessors.

Appeal Process and Equalization Studies

The appeal process should involve knowledgeable and experienced professionals at every stage. Keeping the first step of the grievance process with the assessors before moving it to the PVR will greatly enhance objectivity and reduce potential bias. The second step, as it stands, involves appealing to the BCA, which consists of community members who may not fully understand the property valuation process.

Equalization studies for RADs make more sense, as a larger pool of data will yield more statistically accurate results. Christopher Landin provided a great testimony on Equity and the Sales Ratio Study, presenting valuable analysis and data on this topic.

I have reviewed reports from the Property Valuation and Review Department (PVR) and the International Association of Assessing Officers (IAAO) on this subject and have listened to testimonies from various experts and organizations. I believe the State Reappraisal Bill is both timely and necessary, and I am confident that our state has the talent to implement it successfully.

I strongly support the reform and the establishment of Regional Assessment Districts.

Respectfully submitted,

Natalya Bochkov

VT Lister/Assessor, Town of Plymouth