

My name is Will Stevens and I'm from Shoreham, Addison County. I'd like to thank the Committee for inviting us here today to offer our perspective on the operations of the State Ethics Commission. I am a vegetable farmer muddling my way into retirement, a former state Rep from 2007-14, and a public servant who has served my town in various capacities, including the Selectboard, Planning Commission, and Town Moderator.

I was appointed to the Ethics Commission by the Senate's Committee on Committees a year ago last December, after Act 171 expanded the Commission's membership by giving both the House and the Senate the authority to appoint former municipal officers to the Commission. The Act also expanded the Commission's responsibilities to include municipalities and municipal officers. The Governor allowed it to pass without his signature, and at the time he expressed fears that it amounted to an unfunded mandate because it did not include the resources needed to perform the Commission's expanded duties.

Ethics Commissions exist to ensure good governance by issuing training, advice, and opinions while acting as a neutral third party that gives the public a sense that our representative form of government is acting in their broader interests. Governmental ethics became a big thing in the post-Watergate era, prompting several states to embed Ethics Commissions in their state constitutions because of public distrust in their elected officials. Today we again find ourselves living in a time of shifting norms. A neutral and independent perspective on governmental ethics is perhaps needed now more than ever!

I worry about the future of the Vermont Ethics Commission. In my brief time on the Commission, I've witnessed a dedicated group of people who are stressed out and struggling to perform the tasks assigned to it by the Legislature because of a lack of resources. One part-time Director, one part-time Administrative Assistant, and five volunteer Commissioners simply cannot adequately administer good governance programs and practices to all of Vermont's elected and appointed officials and civil service employees. For the last two years we have asked both the administration and the Legislature to include funds to support the two additional staff positions that we feel are needed to do the work Act 171 tells us to do. Unfortunately, that hasn't happened, which is why we come before you today.

I understand that economically times are tight right now. I was there for the recession budgets of 2008-9, and I know what it feels like to shake the couch cushions looking for spare change to fund essential programs. It isn't fun and it is excruciatingly hard. That said, I'm inclined to acknowledge that the Governor's words about Act 171 now seem prescient; that the Legislature – while acting with good intent – created what amounts to an unfunded mandate. It is a time-honored practice to ensure an entity's failure by giving it more to do while limiting their resources.

I respectfully ask this committee to advocate, for the people of Vermont, funding for the two additional staff positions that were promised in the discussions leading up to the bill's final passage last session. The Ethics Commission needs to actually perform the job it has been tasked with and not be a performative body with no actual capacity.

We have a few other "asks" as well, but nothing as important as ensuring the functionality of the Vermont Ethics Commission. Thank you for your time and interest.