



**Joint House and Senate Government Operations Committees  
Vermont League of Cities and Towns  
Wednesday, February 15, 2017**

Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to present testimony today.

It has been my privilege to work with local government and state municipal leagues for almost 30 years, and I believe strongly in a level of government that is generally quite trusted, where people participate, know the officials they have elected and hold them accountable for their actions.

In northern New England, as you know, local government is distinct from other parts of the country. Cities are the minority form of government and the majority form is Town Meeting, or typically some form of direct democracy. That form allows people to gather to elect neighbors to office and to debate and make decisions about budgets and roads, recreation and schools.

Again, in Northern New England, local government is the level of government where many people believe they can make a difference. They participate, by voting, by attending Town Meeting or volunteering on a committee, attending a meeting of the Planning Commission or the Selectboard or the City Council, the Development Review Board, or any of the myriad boards and commissions in their town or city. People often live in the same place for a very long time, even their whole lives, and they know how they want to see their community, what they want the future to look like, who their leaders should be and why that's important.

Local government is where the practical overtakes the ideal and where solutions to common problems are identified and implemented. There's no place else to go, so local officials and residents have to be very resourceful. Finding solutions can be very contentious and messy at times, but the process can and often does unite residents in a common goal to achieve what is best for the community.

Well, you may be saying at this point, so what? We know there are challenges in small towns and in larger cities. Well, since Vermont is a Dillon's Rule state, cities and towns in Vermont have no independent authority, but depend on the state to grant them the appropriate tools to carry out their mission. It's a pretty limited delegation of authority. Why is that?

Some arguments I've heard here is that Vermont is "too small" and it doesn't make sense to have small towns adopting their own ordinances, bylaws and policies with the force of law. It would

result in a lack of uniformity. Yet, Vermont municipalities already have adopted ordinances and policies that reflect divergent local needs in various communities. People can and are coping with that – it's not that difficult. With all due respect, statewide conformity and uniformity seem to run counter to the Vermont mindset of independent thinking.

Specific policy items such as large scale environmental regulations and policies affecting the entire state, statewide taxes, elections and other broad issues can be addressed through a doctrine known as pre-emption, a situation in which a law passed by a higher authority takes precedence over a law passed by a lower one. Clearly, the State of Vermont could reserve to itself those policies.

But, and I ask this with all sincerity, why should the State need to control whether local voters choose to appoint rather than elect a clerk or a treasurer, change the municipal fiscal year or consolidate services? Who better than the voters who live in that city or town, pay taxes and know that community, to have the ability to make those practical decisions that will affect their lives?

There are 52 cities and towns and 25 incorporated villages that have adopted local option charters. Those communities are home to 53% of Vermont's population. Yet anytime those communities want to update or amend their charters, it has to be approved by the Legislature – *after* local voters have approved the change. Why not allow local voters to determine what is in those charters, the charters that govern how they operate? Clearly, there is a state interest in assuring that charters adhere to the state constitution and do not run counter to state law, but those issues can be addressed prior to the time the local voters express an opinion about the language of their charters. Other than those issues and broad statewide policies, we see no reason for the state to override the will of the voters.

I had the privilege of serving 3 terms in the NH legislature, so I have a lot of respect for you who are willing to serve in the legislature and understand some of the pressures you face. I also served a little over 4 terms on the City Council as many of you have served on local boards.

On a controversial issue in the legislature, I could count on one hand the number of calls I would get on highly charged issues – things like abortion and marijuana and state employee contracts. When I was on the City Council and there was a routine parking issue – the elimination of a parking space on a street with 7 houses or changing parking to one side of the street – I would get 40 phone calls.

My point? People believe they can influence their local officials. They know their towns, they know their neighborhoods and they know their local officials. It's about solving a problem. It's about making things better.

Our message to you is: please partner with us. We know you are trying to do the right thing for the State. Let us make the decisions at the local level that we are well equipped to make, so that it doesn't take up unnecessary time and energy at the State House. In addition, on the issues that have statewide significance, let us help you work to resolve challenges facing all Vermonters: economic development, the environment, climate and infrastructure. Help us to understand the

pressures that you face at the State level and listen to us when we offer suggestions to implement a solution to a local concern or to reduce costs.

There are thousands of volunteers in local government who are committed to making their communities better one day at a time, one decision at a time, one vote at a time.

How fortunate we are to have that kind of willingness to participate and to make a difference at the local *and* the state level. We ask you to acknowledge that and help us make all of our communities prosperous and successful. We can do this together.

Thank you again for your time and for the opportunity to be heard and thank you all for your service to the State of Vermont.

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