

Maura Carroll Loves Her Community

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For a skosh more than five and a half years, Executive Director Maura Carroll has overseen the operations of VLCT with skill, grace, and good humor. And now she is retiring. Not as in “shy and retiring,” oh no, for otherwise the organization wouldn’t have made such monumental strides forward during her tenure.

“I’m proud of our team,” she said in a recent socially-distanced and properly face-masked tête-à-tête. “It’s really become clear to me during these last nine months that Vermonters are willing to embrace change, and that they aren’t afraid of things, such as new technologies, that they may have feared before.”

That holds true for VLCT, too. During the early days of the pandemic, she watched the organization’s employees consider how they were serving their members’ needs, and then decide on their own that it was probably time to think *differently*. “I’m really proud that I’ve been here during that metamorphosis,” she said.

She is equally proud of VLCT’s members. “They are heroes to me because they are always having to look at how things need to be, how they should be, how they *can* be,” she said. “It’s a practicality that’s mixed in with the dreams of a community’s future.”

Maura’s interest in local government commenced at an early age. And I mean *really* early: She began watching the national political conventions when she was eight years old. “I was fascinated by the whole political sphere and decision-making process,” she said. The interest in government ran in her family, as her father served as a New Hampshire county treasurer once he retired from his state career.

After majoring in political science, and attending law school, Maura clerked for the New Hampshire Supreme Court.

She also served in the New Hampshire Legislature for three terms, where she discovered that a young person could have decision-making authority over policy. Then, four score less fifty years ago, an opportunity arose for her to work for the New Hampshire Municipal Association as staff attorney. (She would also serve as its government affairs director, general counsel, and executive director.) At the time, she didn't have a background in municipal law, so it was a good way for her to learn about municipal issues.

"My boss was very encouraging about us participating in local government," she continued, "so I ran for the (Concord, N.H.) city council and served there for eight and a half years." That experience – along with four years as Concord mayor pro tem – helped her to understand issues from the perspective of both the legislature and local government. When the association provided legal advice to local officials, "we knew the pressures they were under because those of us who had been in local government had experienced it ourselves," she said. "It gave us some gravitas as we were presenting or training or even testifying before the legislature."

Her husband also served on the city council and in the legislature. "It was really all about public service," she said. "We didn't have children so we felt that while other people were doing the important work of raising a family, we could take on other roles they wouldn't have time to do. It was all very rewarding!"

Maura truly believes that local government is where things get done, and that people involve themselves in it because they care about their community and want to make it as good as it can be. "There is no partisanship in local government in northern New England, except in limited circumstances," she said. "It's simply about making sure that residents are taken care of. It's trite to say but it's true: 'Potholes aren't Republican or Democratic.' People expect their roads to be plowed and paved and maintained. In our work in the municipal leagues, it's all about supporting [local officials] to get that done. What a great mission that is! And I've really been blessed to be a part of it."

When Vermont and the rest of the world ultimately emerge from the ravages of the pandemic, Maura foresees a changing role for VLCT. "Once our members' post-COVID needs become clear, the way we do business may change," she said. "We may take on additional business-type roles where we could be a center for purchasing. I know this is not a new idea; many leagues have discussed it. But smaller communities in particular would benefit from getting a

better deal on their purchases.”

“Since there is no state agency or other organization in Vermont devoted solely to the needs of local government, it is critical that VLCT have a strong advocacy function to articulate the concerns of municipalities at the state and federal levels,” she continued. “VLCT’s voice supplements those of so many local officials who want to make their communities the best that they can be. Without home rule authority, local government depends on the ability to have its voice heard in order to obtain the tools they need for their towns and cities to thrive.”

Ever the optimist, Maura does find a silver lining in the turmoil that COVID-19 has wreaked, in that it has required VLCT along with local and state governments to be willing to adapt to change. “I think the pandemic has caused us to focus more on the future and not be so complacent that we’re not thinking about next steps,” she said. “That’s critical for [the success of] local government.”

“I think the work VLCT does is really critical,” she added. “I say to our members – but I don’t think I say it enough – that what they do every day *does* makes a difference. They should be proud of that work!”

One other accomplishment she’s proud of occurred when she was on the National League of Cities’ Executive Committee. The NLC president wanted to promote a “Love My City” initiative, and while Maura thought that was a fine idea, she suggested that NLC use the more inclusive phrase of “cities, towns, and villages,” language that was eventually adopted. (We’ll still have to wait to be a member of the National League of Cities, Towns, and Villages, however.) And, of course, VLCT launched its own successful “[Love My Community](#)” campaign in 2019, featured in this issue’s Vermontscapes.

The search is underway for Maura’s successor, and while a thorough vetting process will surely yield a competent candidate, we’ll be hard pressed to find one with the aforementioned unflinching skill, grace, and good humor that Maura has exhibited, day in and day out.

David Gunn
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