

Karen Horn's Way of Advocating for Local Government

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At the end of June, VLCT's long-time Public Policy and Advocacy Director Karen Horn will retire after 36 years of service to Vermont municipalities. VLCT Executive Director Ted Brady caught up with former Executive Director Steve Jeffrey, who hired Karen decades ago. Steve and Karen were recognized as the two foremost experts on municipal issues in the state for three decades – working closely together to educate lawmakers under the golden dome, put on member trainings and Town Fairs, and help municipalities do everything from hire new employees to run effective meetings. Who better to ask for the inside scoop on Karen than her long-time partner in advocacy?

TB: *Do you recall the first time you met Karen? What was her VLCT interview like? Why did you hire her?*

SJ: It was 1987. The League offices were on the second floor of 52 State Street in Montpelier. We were looking for our third legislative and membership services director in five years. Karen came into the interview with her big smile and gracious manner. I think it was during our conversation about salary and I don't recall her exact words, but she made it clear she was no pushover. **That combination of fortitude, good humor, and diplomacy convinced me that this was the person I wanted to represent the interests of Vermont local government.**

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TB: *Over your time at VLCT with Karen, you must have logged a lot of time traveling from town to town together. How did you two manage to accomplish so much during your three decades of service together?*

SJ: We actually did not spend that much time doing things together, at least on the road. VLCT's staff was always too small to duplicate efforts. We practiced "division of labor" during

our time working together, with Karen taking the lead on many efforts while I focused on others. For example, despite my having been on the Northfield Planning Commission for ten years including being its chair, I never understood Vermont's planning and zoning laws because that was one of Karen's areas of expertise. Her office was usually located near mine, and we would be in constant communication with each other, but she handled her responsibilities pretty much soup to nuts. I felt totally comfortable delegating to her.

TB: *Municipal government would look different today if not for Karen Horn. Can you share what you think some of her greatest successes were during your time at VLCT?*

SJ: Vermont is a state with a legal structure granting the strongest state control and among the weakest local control in the nation. The constitution lays out that cities and towns are truly creatures of the state, and it has the total authority to create and destroy them. Given that legal landscape, for most of Vermont's history, in practice the state did let local government handle most of the "governing". Much of VLCT's Municipal Policy focused on new initiatives, but in practice, most of our legislative activity has been fighting unfunded state mandates (making towns do things without the resources to do them) and preemptions (telling towns what they cannot do). It is in these efforts that Karen shines. She is very successful in rallying the real lobbyists of local government – the elected and appointed officials and employees of VLCT member towns and cities – to action. Her factual communications with the members concerning developments in the state house was just the thing to get them to put the pressure on their own representatives and senators.

We lost many more battles than we won, but Karen's fingerprints are on many statutes where the negative impacts were reduced, compliance made much easier, and even some pots of gold discovered at the end of the rainbow after the storms passed.

TB: *Karen is largely known as one of the most polite, kind, patient, and intelligent members of the State House lobbying corps. But there must be another side, right? I've never seen her lose her temper with a member or a legislator. Have you?*

SJ: I neither. In fact, another great feature of working with Karen for so long is that she was so good about talking me down after some confrontation with a state official or legislator. Working with the prima donnas that seem so numerous in that arena was very stressful on me, but it never seemed to get to Karen.

TB: *The legislature can be a confusing place, where information gets stale in hours, bills are rewritten in minutes, and rumors spread in seconds. How did Karen help you and our members cut through the bureaucracy and uncertainty to get results for Vermont's cities, towns, and villages?*

SJ: Karen was able to immerse herself in the legislative process and culture without having the taint of the term "lobbyist" attach to her. Because she is so personable, she had great relationships with other advocates, legislative staff, and the legislators themselves. She is irreproachable, and her word and her knowledge of the topics she works on are gold.

TB: *Is there a story you'd like to share about Karen? Ideally one that compliments her class, style and intelligence ... but we like plain old funny ones too.*

SJ: While working with her, I remember almost always having Karen stories to share with people that knew her and could get a laugh from them. But after eight years of retirement, all that is left of my memory of working with Karen is a great afterglow of respect and admiration for her work ethic, her good humor, and the comfort I experienced knowing that I could rely her to do anything we needed in order to benefit our member municipalities.