



Montpelier, Vermont, June 22, 2021

Veto Session Unicorns Deserve Support

The Vermont Legislature will convene an historic veto session this week. For the first time in our recollection, a governor has vetoed not one but two municipal charter changes. These charter changes deserve to become law.

Every year the legislature is asked to consider municipal charter changes. This year, Vermonters sent 11 charter changes to the State House. Fewer than half of them received an up or down vote. To be vetoed is sort of a back-handed compliment, right?

The Winooski and Montpelier charter changes before the legislature this week allow non-citizens to vote only in those two communities' municipal elections. They were supported locally by two-to-one margins.

Vermont is one of a very few states considered a "Dillon's Rule" state – local governments may only act if the legislature has granted them the power to do so. As a result, 61 Vermont cities and towns, and 45 incorporated villages have gone to the legislature over the years to ask for permission to do everything from collecting local option taxes to hiring librarians to changing the title and functions of a municipal manager.

This approach to governance is hardly the Norman Rockwell image Vermonters have of participatory democracy. When Vermonters show up at Town Meeting they expect their vote to have an impact. Vermont's approach to municipal governance instead sends their vote to Montpelier where it is second-guessed and, all too often, politicized.

In a May 5 interview about municipal charter changes with *Seven Days*, Rep. Sarah Copeland Hanzas, chair of the House Government Operations Committee, said "...you can't just have a group of five members of a legislative body in a town making decisions about changing how the town is going to govern itself. That's not really democracy."

We beg to differ. What's not democratic about a community governing itself? Charter amendments are proposed by a locally-elected legislative body or a group of citizens petitioners. A proposal is debated and subject to public hearing before the local legislative body. It is placed on the ballot and approved or disapproved by the voters. That really *is* democracy.

Vermont's democratic process looks a little less like the School House Rock version of democracy after that.

The measure is sent to the Legislature where it lands as a bill in the House or Senate Government Operations Committee. The committee may debate, amend, or ignore the proposal. Not so incidentally, the legislature may also amend any *other* part of a charter, not just the section voted upon by the municipality's citizens.) Then, 180 legislators who mostly are not from the community in question – debate the legitimacy of the voters' wishes. Only after a charter amendment is approved by the legislature and signed by the governor does it become law in the originating municipality.



Vermont League of Cities & Towns

89 Main Street, Suite 4 | P: 802-229-9111 | info@vlct.org
Montpelier, VT 05602 | F: 802-229-2211 | vlct.org

The Montpelier and Winooski charter changes are unicorns. They are the rare charter changes that emerge through the less-than-perfect legislative sausage factory with a semblance of the will of the municipal voters still intact.

The Vermont League of Cities and Towns urges the Vermont Legislature to promptly vote on the other six charter changes – as well as any new ones that come their way.

In the meantime, the two charter changes before the Legislature this week deserve to become law – not because of what they do, but because of how they got here. Through democracy.

Karen Horn, Director
Public Policy and Advocacy
khorn@vlct.org