

Testimony of the Vermont League of Cities and Towns
Ted Brady, Executive Director
Senate Government Operations
Regarding S. 159 – County Governance Study Committee
January 25, 2024

My name is Ted Brady, and I am the Executive Director of the Vermont League of Cities and Towns, which represents all 247 cities and towns in Vermont. Thank you for asking me in to discuss S. 159, a bill that proposes to commission a study committee charged with enhancing and optimizing “...public safety; regional collaboration and planning; efficiency, equitable, and transparent public resource allocation; and effective regional public services for individuals and municipalities.”

Let me start out with a quote from Calvin Coolidge: “Local self-government is one of our most precious possessions. It is the greatest contributing factor to the stability, strength, liberty, and progress of the nation.” Local government serves an important purpose – of placing some of the most consequential public policy decisions and everyday impacts of government spending and decision making as close to the voter as possible. While a lot has changed in our society since Calvin Coolidge issued those words in 1925 – I hope we can all agree that the importance of putting the citizen in as much control of their community as possible is still a goal.

While a central tenant of the Vermont League of Cities and Towns is retaining local authority to make decisions, we do see the value in the state evaluating whether we have the right governance structures in place to meet 21st century challenges. As we’ve seen in regional dispatch conversations, intermunicipal work is not only difficult to do technically, there are also political challenges that our existing intermunicipal tools – like union municipal districts, intermunicipal agreements, and interlocal contracts seem ill-equipped to address.

Regional Planning Commissions serve a vital purpose in connecting geographically adjacent areas, providing technical assistance, and offering some shared services to municipalities. However, their governance structures, how they are funded, and their various charges from state agencies result in them operating much more like independent municipal entities than a government of other governments. Clearly, a fresh look at how Vermont enables and encourages regional municipal collaboration is in order.

We’d be glad to participate in this fresh look, however, we caution that S. 159 too narrowly charges a committee to evaluate county government. A better approach would be to challenge a group with recommendations to encourage and stimulate regional collaboration. These evaluations all come down to evaluating how best to address governance and money (especially taxing authority). The three largest ideas to be evaluated include:

- Expanding county government roles and responsibilities in Vermont
- Evaluating how the Council of Government model might work here in Vermont

- Identifying additional tools used by other states to enable regional governance and taxing authorities beyond union mutual districts, interlocal contracts, and the few other authorizations in Vermont statute.

I also recommend narrowing the scope of the legislation to address specific government services, as the existing charge might be overwhelming.

Thank you again for asking my opinion, I'd be glad to answer any questions.