



State of Vermont
Office of the Secretary of State
128 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05633-1101

[phone] 802-828-2363
[fax] 802-828-2496
www.sec.state.vt.us

James C. Condos, Secretary of State
Christopher D. Winters, Deputy Secretary

IT'S TIME TO ESTABLISH AN INDEPENDENT ETHICS COMMISSION

Op-Ed by Vermont Secretary of State Jim Condos

June 3, 2015

Vermonters deserve good government - and that includes an open and transparent government!

We are proud of our State and our collective ability to overcome any difficult issue we may encounter. As Vermonters, when we see a problem, we know we can fix it through hard work and a dose of common sense. We expect the same of our government.

Vermont's constitution (Chapter 1, Article 6) states that the power is "*derived from the people, therefore, all officers of government, whether legislative or executive, are their trustees and servants; and at all times, in a legal way, accountable to them.*"

The public's access to open and transparent government is key to our democracy.

This sacred trust must not be taken lightly. We must either restore that accountability or risk Vermonters' faith in our ability to govern.

Over the last 4 years, I have traveled to over 30 locations around Vermont explaining our Open Meeting and Access to Public Records laws on my "Got Transparency?" tour. Several hundred Vermonters have heard my call for more transparency in government and how that leads to increased accountability. I'll be on the road again this fall because this issue is so very important. But is that enough? No.

The time has come for Vermont to enact a clear law regarding ethics, conflicts of interest, and financial disclosure for our elected officials.

Just in the last few years, Vermonters have heard allegations of ethical issues about the Governor, Attorney General, legislators, candidates, and municipal officials. These complaints cross all party lines. The Secretary of State's office receives calls almost every week about municipal officials, alleging conflicts of interest and other ethically suspect actions. With no authority for the Secretary of State to investigate or enforce these complaints, these citizens come away from the process feeling frustrated, helpless and increasingly cynical.

The time has come to create an independent ethics commission to address complaints from the Legislative, Executive, and Municipal sections of government.

Vermont is one of only 3 states nationwide without an Ethics Commission. The 2012 Center for Public Integrity ranking of the states had Vermont with an overall grade of D+, in large part because we do not have an authoritative ethics commission or the required financial disclosures existing in nearly every other state. Vermont can and must do better!

A focus on Ethics should include: a clear definition of conflicts of interest, required financial disclosures by all candidates and elected officers, and establishing an independent Ethics Commission. This independent body should be empowered to adopt a code of ethics and to fairly and impartially field complaints from the public to determine if a violation has occurred in the areas of conflict of interest, campaign finance, or financial disclosure. This Ethics Commission must also have the authority to enforce those laws. This will require a budget and a small staff to be effective, but these investments will be a small price to pay for a more accountable government and a place where affected Vermonters can seek redress.

This is not a new issue – in fact, I have spoken on this topic many times over the last five years. I often hear that we are a small state and are not affected by such things, but frankly, that is not good enough. Recent events are more than enough bear out the need for an ethics commission once again.

By and large, we are served well by our dedicated public servants. The vast majority of our elected state and local officials are trustworthy, dedicated and passionate individuals who want to do the right thing. However, corruption can exist, and in small doses it can be just as corrosive to our democracy as any prominent scandal, undermining the public trust.

Will establishing an ethics committee suddenly provide government a moral compass? Certainly not, but it will be a step in the right direction and will shine a brighter light on better transparency and accountability.

It's about time we move Vermont forward – let's fix this!