



TO: Working Group on the Status of Libraries in Vermont
FROM: Katie Buckley, Director, Federal Funding Assistance Program
DATE: May 26, 2023
RE: Library Structures and Organizations

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony for the "Library Structures and Organizations" Working Group meeting on May 26, 2023. Below you will find general information about the Vermont League of Cities and Towns as an organization. Comments regarding VLCT's relationship to public libraries in Vermont are from the perspective of my role as the Director of the [Federal Funding Assistance Program](#), not the broader organization. If questions arise during my testimony that I am unable to answer, I can point you to others on the VLCT team who can. If questions arise during future Working Group meetings that you think VLCT might be helpful in answering, please do not hesitate to reach out to us.

Who makes up your membership?

Full membership: All 247 organized Vermont cities and towns are eligible for full municipal membership. This membership allows voting privileges and input on policy development and adoption, as well as access to all the League's services.

Associate Membership: Available to Vermont villages, counties, housing authorities, solid waste districts, fire districts, regional planning agencies, communications union districts, and other political subdivisions of the State of Vermont. Associate members are entitled to the same services provided to full members except voting privileges at our annual meeting.

Partner Membership: Available to businesses and non-profit organizations. This membership is part of our [Business Alliance Program](#) and replaces Contributing Membership, inheriting all of its former benefits while adding many new benefits, including access to our sponsorship programs.

What is your organization's role?

VLCT is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that was founded in 1967 with the ***mission of serving and strengthening Vermont local government***. It is owned by its member municipal governments. A thirteen-member Board of Directors is elected to represent the general membership and govern the organization. Board members must serve as a selectperson, mayor, manager, or clerk in a member municipality. All VLCT member officials are welcome to attend board meetings. An executive director, appointed by the board, manages the league's day-to-day operations in assisting members.

VLCT provides a range of support, services and assistance such as:

- Educational workshops and consulting advice for municipal officials so that they can deliver excellent service to their residents
- Support for legislation that strengthens local government
- Comprehensive insurance coverage for municipalities
- A Municipal Assistance Center for consultation on a wide range of municipal issues

VLCT has contractual arrangements in place with its sister organizations – the VLCT Property and Casualty Intermunicipal Fund (PACIF) and the VLCT Employment Resource and Benefits Trust (VERB). PACIF provides property, casualty, and workers compensation insurance to 354 municipalities in Vermont. VERB provides unemployment insurance services to 210 municipalities in Vermont.

[VLCT's Member Guide](#) helps members understand all the benefits available to them as members.

VLCT posts a [short annual report for 2021](#) for the organization on its website.

What is the cost structure for membership?

As a member organization, VLCT charges dues for membership. Full members are charged a flat fee plus a cost per capita. For example, VLCT dues in FY23 for a town of 2,500 people would be \$4,245. Associate members pay a flat fee (different than the full members' flat fee); for FY23 it is \$997.50. Partnership members' "dues" are tiered, depending upon which level of benefit a partner organization wants to have.

What support or service does your organization provide to members/libraries/the Vermont public?

VLCT only provides support and services ("Programs") to its members (full and associate memberships); it does not serve the private sector (non-profit or for-profit) nor the Vermont public. Since municipalities are full members, municipal libraries are eligible to use VLCT's services which range from education and trainings to insurance coverage, human resources issues, advocacy in the Vermont legislature, to legal inquiries, and much more. More information and details about VLCT's ["Programs"](#) can be found on our website.

What is going well with regard to your support for libraries?

VLCT received funding through the State of Vermont to assist Vermont's municipalities accept, administer, and expend \$200M+ in local ARPA funds as well as access the trillions of dollars through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA, "Bipartisan Infrastructure Law") and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA). This funding has allowed VLCT to broaden the scope of its traditional support and services to municipalities to help them advance local initiatives, most of which are capital projects. It stood up the Federal Funding Assistance Program (FFA) and hired staff with expertise in working with and for municipalities and carrying out local projects with complex capital stacks involving multiple federal programs.

FFA assists all VLCT's full members, **which includes municipal libraries**. One of the most valuable services offered is *Consults on Call*. This allows members to self-book a 30-minute appointment with FFA staff to discuss their local project or initiative. Whether their project is just in the idea phase, has started to gain momentum, has stalled completely or the member just needs help prioritizing projects before getting started, the *Consults on Call* service can provide useful information, connections to resources, funding recommendations, suggested action steps, etc. FFA staff are seeing a growing awareness to this service with municipalities asking about library improvement projects.

What are some pinch points with regard to your support for libraries?

VLCT's Federal Funding Assistance Program staff assist municipalities throughout Vermont on capital projects, **libraries** among them. We work with local officials to strengthen their project and help them access the massive amount of grant funding that will be available to implement it. For a library project, the first and most important question we ask is "who owns the building?" Most often the answers are "we are not sure" or "I *think* we do?" (posed as a question, not a statement). Clarity of ownership is critical relative to the funding sources needed to advance a development project. Given the large amount of grant funding that is and will be available for library capital projects, both through the VT Department of Libraries and other agencies, resolving issues around ownership, authority, responsibility, and accountability with crystal clarity is essential for success. This can only be done through strong collaboration and a sense of partnership between legislative bodies and library trustees that includes effective communication, coordination, and documentation. Handshake or anecdotal agreements need to cease and be replaced by written and recorded agreements. If libraries could worry less about the real estate they occupy, it would allow them to focus on their purpose which is to serve the public.

VLCT welcomes the opportunity to create a suite of specific resources to help resolve library real estate issues and advance library capital projects but lacks the staff capacity needed to dedicate themselves to this niche of municipal government.

What do you see on the horizon for your organization in the next 10 years?

In 2021, VLCT hired a new, dynamic Executive Director, Ted Brady. Ted is the former Deputy Secretary of the Agency of Commerce and Community Development, State Director for VT and NH for USDA, and longtime staff member of Senator Patrick Leahy. He brings a fresh, different perspective to VLCT. Upon his arrival, he and his leadership team quickly created a bold 5-year strategic plan (summary found [HERE](#)). Its four cornerstone goals are:

1. Grow a sustainable and relevant member-focused organization
2. Strengthen the capacity of local government
3. Develop and attract outstanding talent to local government
4. Champion inclusive and resilient communities

Implementation of the strategic plan brings changes to VLCT to help municipalities govern in the 21st century. Among them is building and growing partnerships with organizations that support local government to broaden the reach and impact of VLCT's work. This can be seen through VLCT's strengthened relationships and collaboration with Vermont's eleven regional planning commissions, twelve regional development corporations, State agencies (ANR, AOA, AOT, BGS, DHCD, PSD/VCBB, etc.) and statewide entities (REDI/VHCB, VCRD, VHFA, VECAN, VAC, VTGFOA, VT AARP, VCUDA, etc.).

What improvements in statewide structures would help the libraries and library staff your organization supports?

VLCT would welcome a more intentional and collaborative relationship with the Vermont Department of Libraries, especially as it relates to the work of the Federal Funding Assistance Program and the forthcoming \$26M+ of capital funds to be administered by the Department. The League sees this moment as a tremendous opportunity to resolve the longstanding issues mentioned above - ownership, authority, responsibility, and accountability - and educate and train legislative bodies and library trustees on topics that include improved communications, long-range strategic planning, formalizing relationships with agreements, budgeting and capital planning, etc. With more intentional structure and clear expectations town officials can work together harmoniously to achieve their goals. The municipalities that can do these things well are the ones that are most vibrant and successful. For the others, there is a capacity gap (skills and bandwidth). A partnership between VLCT and the Vermont Department of Libraries could help fill this gap now and build the foundation for it to continue long into the future.