

Open government is good government for all of us

Note: March 15 to 21 is Sunshine Week across the country, when media celebrate and encourage open government. As a lead-up to that, we publish this opinion piece by Vermont Secretary of State Jim Condos. He has long been an advocate for open government.

The New England Newspaper and Press Association, The Boston Globe, and this newspaper are working together to encourage newspapers across every state to run an editorial on the importance of open government.

Please join us in raising our collective voice for transparency and access to public information.

This year, I am asking all legislators to join me in committing to protect and expand access for Vermonters who are seeking access to public records.

The bottom line is: open government is good government!

Vermonters shouldn't have to pay for access to inspect public records their government creates in the course of agency business. Navigating whom to ask, and how to request public records is enough of a hurdle for most Vermonters. They shouldn't also be charged an arm and a leg to inspect those records.

Remember, public records access isn't merely a courtesy that Vermont government extends to the public. These records actually belong to the public. Government agencies and staff are merely the custodians in possession of them.

Generous access to public records is rooted in the Vermont Constitution, and the Vermont statutes: "It is the policy of this subchapter to provide for free and open examination of records consistent with Chapter I, Article 6 of the Vermont Constitution. Officers of government are trustees and servants of the people and it is in the public interest to enable any person to review and criticize their decisions even though such examination may cause inconvenience or embarrassment." (1 V.S.A. § 315(a)).

Recent discussions around public records access in Vermont have me concerned, and with the start of the legislative session right around the corner, there is no doubt this issue may be brought before the Legislature.

I want to widen our focus and remind us that access to public records lies at the very core of government transparency and accountability. Government should not be shutting Vermonters out, and operating behind closed doors - instead the doors should be opened, letting the sunshine in.

With trust in government at an all-time low, I truly believe that sunshine is the best disinfectant.

The legal apparatus that ensures records access, the Public Records Act, makes clear that government agencies may not charge the public for access to inspect, and that the identity or motive of the requestor cannot be a factor when deciding on whether to grant access.

The Vermont Supreme Court (2019) decision in *Doyle v. Burlington Police Department* states clearly that the law does not allow charging for inspection of documents.

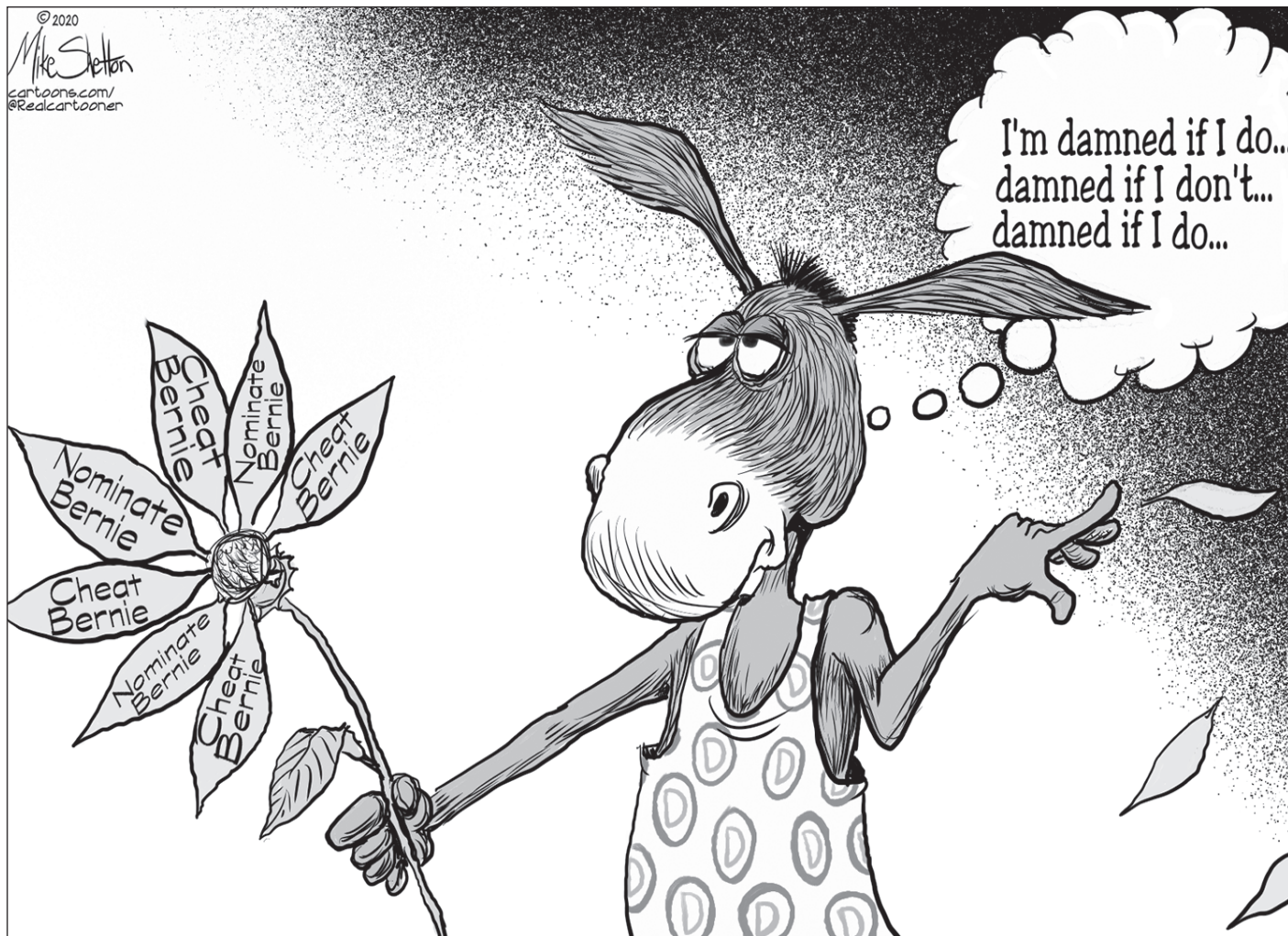
Additionally, the law says when charges are applicable, government can only charge for the actual cost incurred. This is critical to a functioning government, allowing the public to audit, criticize, and ultimately develop trust.

I know it isn't easy. Redacting information that shouldn't be broadly released, like personal medical information, or personal identification information from a record, can be onerous and take up staff time and resources.

To be frank, at times it can be a burden. As a government by and for the people, that is our burden to shoulder.

I hope that if our Legislature considers proposals to change Vermont's public records laws, they will join me in looking forward to strengthening the law, and not seek to move us backward. We should expand access by consolidating or clarifying the many exemptions spread across statute, and by creating a public records ombudsperson to support and enable the law to work effectively not only for the public, but also for the agencies wishing to follow the law and comply.

We should not be creating new lockboxes or throwing up curtains to further obscure the public's much-needed windows into the inner workings of state government. I hope our legislators will join me in making it our shared resolution to protect and expand access to public records. Let's start the decade off with an open book and a clear vision looking forward.



Inequities laid bare by Pupil Weighting Study

To the Editor,

The Marlboro School Board wishes to express its condemnation of the injustices that have persisted within the Vermont schools' Pupil Weighting System over the last 20 years. The 2019 Pupil Weighting Study Report laid bare the egregious inequities that have existed for two decades, and the utter failure of the Agency of Education and Legislature to analyze and rectify these inequalities. The Marlboro School has felt this malfeasance most keenly in the last few years as we have attempted to make necessary infrastructure repairs. Our building has been in desperate need of substantial repairs for a number of years but the financial strain that a new roof, for example, would place on the taxpayers of Marlboro has forced the board to repeatedly delay this and other much-needed renovations.

While we have dutifully worked within the constraints of the current inequitable system, we've run out of Band-Aids.

The conclusions revealed by the weighting study clearly point to gross failures within the agency and the Legislature to monitor and assess enacted policies which place an undue financial burden on many Vermont communities while benefiting others. This inequality is unconscionable. That our state leaders have allowed this to happen through their inattention, year after year, is unacceptable.

We insist that the Legislature implement the recommenda-

tions of the 2019 Pupil Weighting Study Report immediately in order to make amends for the burdens it has inequitably placed upon taxpayers for decades. Though a failure of omission rather than commission, the financial hardship to the taxpayers has been the same regardless. This immediate correction will assist our town - along with many others throughout the state - in protecting our students' rights to a safe and secure place of learning while relieving our taxpayers from the undue burden of legislative oversight failure.

The Marlboro School Board

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Marlboro



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Join the movement, believe in Marlboro College

To the Editor,

After years of institutional mismanagement and months of fostering confusion, misdirection, and outright fabrications, the Marlboro College Board of Trustees and its president are set to close down the 70-year-old institution and transfer its \$35 million remaining endowment to Emerson College in Boston, along with a handful of tenured Marlboro faculty. Meanwhile, Emerson will sell the \$10 million campus to the highest bidder.

Everyone else will lose their jobs, Windham County will lose a remarkable asset, Vermont will see the further diminution of its long-standing tradition of small, independent colleges, and higher education in America will see a small increase in the homogenization of higher education.

None of that has to happen. There are alternatives.

Now, inspired by the over 1,100 friends and alumni of Marlboro who have signed the online petition questioning this

"merger," we have launched the movement "I Believe in Marlboro College."

You can join the 40 friends and alumni of Marlboro who have pledged over \$57,000 in a new campaign to support a fiscally responsible, reorganized, and rejuvenated Marlboro right where it is today, where it belongs.

Visit www.ibelieveinmarlborocollege.org to see who has joined the campaign, what has happened, and how we can oppose it. But time is short. As the president of Emerson said, "By July 1, Marlboro College will cease to exist." Unfortunately, the Marlboro president and trustees claim over and over, "There is no other choice."

Let's prove them wrong.

Make a pledge. Send this announcement to other friends and alumni. Join the movement to oppose Marlboro's disappearance and to build and support its regeneration.

Amy Tudor
Marlboro

Honored to work in town

To the editor,

I am so honored to work in a town that is determined to serve its community to its best every day.

This weekend I was unsuccessful in my attempts to deliver an electric wheelchair to one of my clients. One of my helpers suggested I try the road crew in Wilmington, so I left a message for Sheldon Brassor at the town garage.

Sheldon met me the next day with his son Brandon, thinking they could assess the situation and likely do it themselves, but soon realized the snow made it impossible to safely load it onto a truck. In no time a giant bucket loader drove in my dooryard, with extra help bringing a giant blue tarp, cushions and heavy duty cords to secure the chair safely in the bed of the bucket.

The family was so surprised to see a loader driving up their road and immediately recognized some of the men making this special delivery that would bring so much comfort and added mobility.

This family is so thankful for all the kindnesses afforded them since living in and retiring in Wilmington. And I am grateful that my community and its residents continue to step up to help our neighbors in need.

"Thank you" never feels like enough, but I offer it with gratitude.

Jennifer Fitzgerald, RN
Town Nurse
Wilmington

Join the family, build a home

To the Editor,

Hurrah! West River Habitat for Humanity has found a qualifying family for our next house!

The family has been local for generations, well known to almost everybody, with two small children. It will be our sixth home in this area. We have the land already and enough money in the bank to pay for the materials to build. Now what we need is volunteers, and most especially a qualified contractor to run the show.

We will be clearing the land in April and breaking ground as soon as the earth

will have us.

You probably promised yourself in January that you would "Get out in the community more, do something for someone else." Well, here is your chance. Habitat International's motto is "We don't just build houses. We build communities." And it is true.

People who work on Habitat builds always end up saying, "We felt like a big family."

Please call (802) 464-5156 or email overthehill1614@gmail.com if you wish to join the team.

Claudette Hollenbeck
Wilmington

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The Deerfield Valley News will accept news, sports, events, and other information from groups and organizations throughout our circulation area.

- Submit press releases electronically. Please include high resolution photos with photo information and names.
 - We do not write press releases. All press releases are subject to editing and run depending on space availability.
 - Press releases must contain a contact and phone number.
 - Releases must report actual events. Opinions or "thank you" should not be expressed within the release; submit those to letters@vermontmedia.com.
 - We can't guarantee a press release will publish on a specific week. Those with date sensitive information should be submitted as an advertisement to ensure the information runs on time.
- Call the advertising department at (802) 464-3388. Please email releases to events@vermontmedia.com.

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