

# Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford, State Archivist

## Combing the Archival Record

Thanks to my daughter Dosia, I recently encountered a series of excerpts from self-help books of the Italian Renaissance. For example, to improve your memory, when you nap take your shoes off, cover your head with a light cloth and, upon waking, comb your hair with an ivory comb and eat six raisins and six juniper berries. Ondis, the woman who (usually) tolerates me, suggested that I was reaching a point where a comb, much less an ivory one, was superfluous and why bother with juniper berries when we could drink gin. While these modifications seemed reasonable, my memory has not achieved the anticipated improvements.

One of the advantages of records is that we don't have to rely exclusively on memory. By combing through archival records, for example, one can extend one's memory beyond the boundaries of personal experience and recollection.

What inspired these thoughts are the current studies and reports on improving government efficiency and effectiveness in a time of reduced resources and looming deficits. These studies include the Joint Legislative Government Accountability Committee's work with the Public Strategies Group; the Vermont Commission on Judicial Operations; and the Tiger Teams examining certain executive branch units.

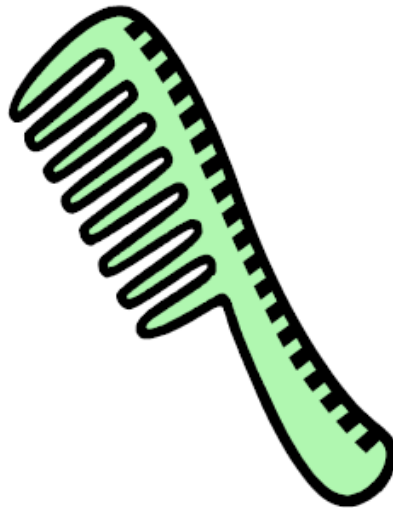
One does not have to comb through the records for very long before encountering similar studies. A quick sampling includes 1957's Commission to Study State Government (the "Little Hoover Commission"); 1969's report on the "Reorganization of the Executive Branch" by the Committee on Administrative Coordination; 1977's Governor's Cost Control Council; 1991's Vermont Information Strategy Plan; and 1998's Blue Ribbon Commission on State Government Performance and Work Force Needs (which, in turn, drew on the 1994-95 Performance Restructuring Pilot Project and the 1997 Study on the Function and Structure of Government).

And that quick combing barely scratches the surface of studies on government. Such periodic government navel contemplation is absolutely fascinating to me. It provides glimpses, over time, of how we define essential services, how we view government organizationally, and how (or if) we implement recommendations from the studies.

Economic downturns and growing demands for services against limited resources inspired many studies. These quests for "efficiencies" and "effectiveness" were frequently coupled with a sense that government structures had become too unwieldy. The 1957 Little Hoover Commission bemoaned the "administrative sprawl" of over a hundred independent agencies that lacked "cohesion...direct lines of responsibility and accountability" and often resulted in "overlapping and duplication of effort." It recommended that the "major departments of state government" be reassembled and streamlined "to gain increased efficiency and economy." The 1977 Governor's Cost Control Council examined "efficiency in administration," "increased responsiveness to the public," and both better "continuity in planning" and improved "interdepartmental planning and coordination." The 1998 Blue Ribbon Commission on State Government Performance and Work Force Needs sought to "increase efficiency and to improve citizen...satisfaction while controlling costs."

It is possible to see antecedents to current recommendations in these previous reports. The 1998 Blue Ribbon Commission on State Government Performance, like the 2010 Challenges For Change report, called for performance-based budgeting. One of the Vermont Information Strategy Plan (VISIP) reports called for a technology-based client-centric approach to the delivery of human services, foreshadowing another current recommendation.

The studies reveal changes in organizational thinking. Many studies called for re-structuring agencies and departments to improve lines of responsibility while eliminating or consolidating some boards and commissions. The Little Hoover report called for creating an agency of



administration by drawing together the divisions of accounting, budget and management, personnel, public buildings, public records, purchasing, and taxes. It also called for the elimination of all smaller agencies "carrying on related functions."

Other studies view government from a functional, as opposed to structural, perspective, usually in connection with the use of information technologies (IT). This linking of function and IT dates back to at least the Little Hoover Commission's recommendation for centralized data processing to support certain functions across departments. One of the strongest ties between functional analysis and the effective use of IT came out of the Vermont Information Strategy Plan (VISP) launched by Governor Snelling in 1991.

A collective view of the reports can also reveal the ebb and flow of ideas. While Little Hoover recommended grouping financial functions together to be supported by centralized data processing, the 1977 Cost Control report bemoaned that "combining the functions of centralized budget control, management analysis, data processing systems' development and facility operation into a single department has hampered the efficient use of these

statewide services." The report called for a separate Department of State Information Systems "to improve relations between the data processing operations and user agencies." The role of information technologies in these reports deserves its own study.

There is much to be learned from these government studies of government and from the subsequent efforts to implement their recommendations. Reading the reports, however, leaves one feeling almost quixotic because they reveal an unintended irony. Many, such as the Blue Ribbon Commission, realized that improved government performance will only come "if state agencies engaged in an ongoing strategic planning process...guided by uniform principles and considerations." The fact that every few years a special commission or committee echoes that recommendation suggests that a sustained planning process continues to elude us.

Many of the reports mentioned above can be found on our web page under "Spotlight on Records:" <http://vermont-archives.org/research/spotlight/records.htm>.