

Testimony of Josh Unruh
Vermont Selectboard Chairman
House Bill 178
April 25, 2017

Vernon, Vermont is a tight knit community of about 2,200 people. When the Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Plant began commercial operation in 1972, our town grew around it. New homes were built, new businesses opened, families grew, and a mutually beneficial partnership was forged between industry and residents.

As the largest employer in the region, Vermont Yankee employees were an important part of our community and the communities surrounding Vernon. Our neighbors and friends made Vermont Yankee a safe and reliable energy source for our community for over 40 years.

With the help of Vermont Yankee, our town grew into a beautiful place to live and raise a family, with an excellent school, reliable infrastructure, and some of the best municipal facilities in our region. Vermont Yankee helped define our community by providing good paying jobs, stable employment, and acting as a responsible and involved corporate neighbor. Local businesses as well as non-profit groups benefited from Vermont Yankee's support and its employees' activity in the community. Vermont Yankee never failed to carry out on their promise to give back to the community by doing business locally and providing significant revenues to small businesses throughout the region. However, when Vermont Yankee closed, the cornerstone of our local community disappeared, causing families and friends to move away, and in turn, our businesses shuttered and many community members were left searching for jobs.

About 300 million dollars a year no longer circulates in Vermont's economy due to the plant shutdown. Sadly, our small businesses are feeling that crunch the most, with reports as high as 20% in lost revenues. In addition, \$58 million in payroll per year is no longer paid to the over 500 people Vermont Yankee once employed.

This money no longer supports the town of Vernon, the community's small businesses, and the many non-profits around the region that relied on Vermont Yankee. Programs that serve our youngest population have been greatly reduced or eliminated, and services for our elderly population are at risk. The engine that drove our community died, and our town and region have slowed to a halt because of it.

At our last Town Meeting, residents regretfully voted NOT to fund any of the social services that traditionally aided our most at-risk population. Financial pressures in the face of rising taxes have forced residents to make difficult choices in order to make ends meet. Our only local retail store has closed, housing values have plummeted, and taxes are expected to continue to increase. Residents have been forced to fill the financial gap in order to maintain minimum town services. Increases in property taxes and declining home values have placed a significant burden on those members of our community that can least afford it.

The impact has been more than financial. When Vermont Yankee closed, families moved or were torn apart when houses couldn't sell and some parents were forced to find work at other plants – only able to come home on the weekends, if they are lucky. Our friends were scattered to other states when the cornerstone of our economy disappeared. The culture and identity of our town will be forever changed.

And our town has not been the only one affected by the closing of Vermont Yankee. A tri-county region that includes Massachusetts and New Hampshire has suffered the loss of business, support and employment. In the absence of political and legal battles, it is conceivable that the plant could have continued operations well into the future. It could have continued to provide good paying jobs, it could have continued to support local services and projects and it could have continued to provide safe, reliable and affordable energy for New England.

Without Vermont Yankee, our Planning Commission is looking into continuing Vernon's history of energy generation by capitalizing on our natural resources and the existing infrastructure, including the river, a functioning rail bed, and a switchyard. We are focused on making the Vermont Yankee site available and attractive for new and innovative industrial development, while maintaining our mission of once again being on the forefront of energy production in Vermont.

It is clear that Vernon, once the proud home of a nuclear facility, will now be a long term host to dry cask storage of used fuel rods. This scenario is not ideal, but our community has come to accept it, and will adapt, in hopes that the political climate will allow for permanent storage at a federal facility at some point in the future.

Still, Vernon is a proud community, with our backbone in electric generation and agriculture. We were a thriving town before Vermont Yankee and will continue to endure after it's decommissioning, but we will never be the same. If we could build a new nuclear plant and bring our families and friends back to Vernon, we would do it in a heartbeat. In turn we would be able to bring back clean reliable energy and ensure stability to our economy and our power grid.

The fate of Vernon does not have to be the fate of communities here in Ohio. As you consider your state and your community's future in relation to House Bill 178, remember what happened in Vernon, Vermont. While our town cannot turn back the clock, we urge you to learn from our experience, and do what is best for your communities.