

- 2017 -

Town Meeting Report

Representative Emily Long Windham-5: Marlboro, Newfane & Townshend

Dear Friends and Neighbors,

The 2017 legislative session has been one of great uncertainty. We have new administrations in Montpelier and in Washington, DC, both of whom have signaled significant priority shifts from their predecessors. While we closely monitor what potential budget cuts the federal government may pass down, we face serious challenges with our own state budget. The budget Governor Scott proposed to the legislature doesn't balance, it raises property taxes and is built on a concept that will be challenged in court. I am not willing to vote for an unbalanced budget. Instead, we will lead by sending the Senate a balanced budget that works toward our vision of a strong, healthy future for Vermont.

I invite you to reach out to me with questions, thoughts, and concerns. The work in Montpelier is diverse and important and I value your input along the way. In addition to the contact information provided in this report, I can also be reached (Tues-Fri) on the Statehouse phone: (800) 322-5616.

Best Regards,
Emily



Please stay in touch!

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Education

I serve on the House Education Committee and we have been working on several initiatives so far this year.

Comprehensive Education Governance Reform

Act 46 was signed into law in 2015. The law was the first comprehensive education governance reform since the 1890s. Act 46 was designed to encourage and support community-based decisions to unify schools and promote equity in quality and variety of educational opportunities. Since July 1, 2015, voters in 58 towns have approved the unification of 66 school districts. Of the approximately 87,000 K-12 students in Vermont, 44,075 of them now reside in a unified school district. These successes notwithstanding, some communities have encountered challenges as they work to unify their schools. Legitimate concerns of geography, local culture and current governance structure have, in some areas, posed logistical issues in some communities. The House Education Committee continues to take testimony and is working with their counterparts in the Senate to develop legislation to increase flexibility for school district mergers.

Achieving the Goals of Universal Prekindergarten

Since 2014, Vermont has offered universal prekindergarten to all of Vermont's 3, 4 and 5-year-olds who are not enrolled in kindergarten, allowing access to high quality, affordable learning. We know children are more likely to lead productive lives when, in the critical years from birth to 5, they learn in safe, nurturing environments that promote proper child development. While enrollments have increased and more children are receiving the care they need to learn and grow, to ensure the continued success of universal pre-K, several changes need to be made to

strengthen the program. In the House, we are looking at ways to increase the number of Vermont families who utilize the State's universal pre-K system and are evaluating the pre-K structure to determine whether efficiencies and reduced bureaucracy can be achieved.

When it comes to attracting workers to Vermont, we continue to focus on people in the 28-35 year-old age range who have an affinity for Vermont and are ready to settle down. These young Vermonters and potential Vermonters want to put down roots here, but say that we need better careers, career advancement, public transportation, housing and broadband. We have the quality of life they want for themselves and their families; we need to continue to support their passion for our state with the economic opportunities they need to thrive.

Boosting Career and Technical Education for Vermonters

It's an exciting time for Vermont's career and technical centers (CTE). We are seeing them dedicate courses to in-demand, high paying jobs like computer hardware application development, website design, plumbing and electrical work, welding, automotive technology and healthcare. These are fields that offer successful careers for Vermonters and help to strengthen our economy. The House Education Committee is exploring how to expand opportunities for technical and high-tech education to middle school students, as well as reviewing how we fund CTE programs so more students can access them. A bill is being developed to promote more middle school students' engagement in technical and high-tech fields, allowing exploration of CTE programs at an earlier age. Helping students find their passion, and giving schools the right tools to help them, is the focus of our work this session.

Vermont Budget Update

During the hard times of the recession, state government and businesses stepped up to partner with Vermonters to ensure all of us were safe and able to thrive. This meant taking a hard look at government priorities and providing funding for those that met our core values.

The legislature is directing the focus of the Fiscal Year 2018 budget to be even more supportive of growing the Vermont economy. For many years we have worked to bring sustainability and stability to the budget by not paying for on-going expenses with money that is only available in the short term.

Unfortunately, the budget Governor Scott proposed is not balanced, is built on a concept that will be challenged in court, and raises property taxes. The governor's proposal to balance the general fund is to add \$135.9 million in spending to the Education Fund. This will shift many new costs, including money available for higher education, teachers' retirement, child care and other costs. However, it only recommends transferring \$86 million from the General Fund to cover this additional pressure, leaving a gap of \$50 million to be paid by property taxes. The governor's education proposal is one of two things - a woefully thought out plan that did not involve input from citizen school board members, or a cynical political move. Governor Scott needs to submit a new budget that is balanced and doesn't raise property taxes.

We are unwilling to be one of the few legislatures in Vermont history to pass an unbalanced budget. Instead, we will lead by sending the Senate a balanced budget that works toward our vision of a strong, healthy future for Vermont.

Workforce Development

Analyzing worker classifications, wages, benefits and flexible education opportunities lead our current goals in the House Commerce Committee. Other constructs that go into the process of successful economic development are also top priorities.

The lack of an available labor and talent pool is the largest impediment to economic growth in Vermont. Many adults over 50 are underemployed or are unable to find jobs that utilize their experience. At the same time, Vermont high school graduates who chose not to pursue postsecondary education or training typically do not have the skill set or aptitude to fill job openings that provide them with a livable wage and meaningful career path. The Commerce Committee is always analyzing all the available data to gain a greater perspective of this dilemma and to find solutions, from more affordable college to

better postsecondary options that fit nontraditional students. We are working on legislation to address these issues, focusing on building the workforce and meeting the needs of employers.

Preparing for Federal Cuts

Rarely before has a new administration in Washington DC left Vermont with such uncertainty. Between President Trump's campaign pledges to cut program funding and his new agency secretaries who are promising sweeping regulatory changes or threatening to unravel the regulatory environment completely, your citizen legislators in Montpelier are very concerned.

Some of the changes we hear about could impact environmental protection funds, vouchers for housing, special education money, and even free lunch for Vermont school children.

We are monitoring any potential changes in Washington DC, as well as collaborating with advocates and our Congressional delegation to try and mitigate or prepare for whatever this new Washington DC might throw at us. When a new Executive Order or guidance on funding changes comes out, we will be prepared to immediately work to address any negative impacts on Vermonters.

Approximately 35% of Vermont's budget comes from federal grants - including money for Dr Dynasaur, transportation improvements, food stamps, and safe drinking water. We know a strong, healthy Vermont will require us to act quickly in the event of major changes to these programs. We are prepared to protect our strong economy and Vermont's future by responding quickly to changes.

Focusing on Vermont Infrastructure

The House Committee on Corrections and Institutions is responsible for putting together the capital bill from the Governor's recommended budget. Unlike the General Fund, which gets its revenue from taxes and fees, the funding for items in the capital bill comes from state borrowing. These items generally include things like renovations to State-owned buildings, improvements to our State Parks, and projects overseen by the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB).

For the next two years, VHCB funds will be directed to conservation projects and improving water quality. Projects will include those designed to keep residents out of institutions (prisons, state hospital, nursing homes, motels), and reducing pressure on the fund budget; improving projects with already significant public investment and affordability or federal rental subsidies that would otherwise be lost; housing projects that would alleviate the burden in stressed rental markets, and downtown and village center revitalization projects.

A few quick facts about Vermont

- Unemployment rate: 3.1%, which was the 5th lowest unemployment rate in the country last year
- We enjoyed 40k more visitors at our attractions in 2016
- The economic impact of the craft beer industry is over \$350 million
- Dairy brings \$2.2 Billion dollars to Vermont's economy every year according to Vermont Dairy

