

# 2020 Town Meeting Report

Representative Kitty Toll

Cabot- Danville - Peacham



I am honored to serve Cabot, Danville and Peacham in the Vermont House. Vermont's legislature is made up of citizens from across the state. Each town or city is represented by community members who bring their neighbors' voices to the House, where issues are debated. I want to thank everyone who has reached out to me so far during the 2020 session. Your feedback provides valuable perspective as we work through bills. This session, the House advanced and passed a number of bills to build a strong Vermont economy, invest in our communities, protect the needs of vulnerable Vermonters, and to prepare for the future. Please continue to be in touch with me during the session.

The legislature is expected to adjourn in early to mid-May. The debates of 2020 may pause, but my work in the community continues year-round. Please be in touch if you have any questions for the remainder of the session or during the off session.

## State Budget

The first order of business for the House Appropriations Committee is to make needed adjustments to the current year budget to ensure the budget remains balanced. "Budget Adjustment" occurs midway through the fiscal year. The fiscal year 2020 adjustment was relatively small with less than a one percent change in the General Fund. This budget adjustment was supported with internal transfers and additional revenue as reported in both July 2019 and January 2020.

The Governor's Budget Address in January reveals the Administration's proposed budget recommendations for the upcoming fiscal year, July 1, 2020 – June 30, 2021. The recommendations fund the work and the programs of all of state government. Following the Budget Address, the Appropriations Committee began its work to create a balanced budget for consideration by the House of Representatives. To involve Vermonters in the process and give community members the opportunity to voice opinions on the Governor's proposals, the Committee held nine public hearings across the state, including two at the State House. Over 350 Vermonters shared their thoughts and concerns regarding proposed investments and changes to current funding. For a summary on the Governor's proposed budget please visit: <https://finance.vermont.gov/budget/budget-recommendations/operating-budget/fy2021>

## Message from Vermont's Treasurer

The State Treasurer's Office is responsible for reuniting Vermonters with lost financial property. Last year, over \$6 million in unclaimed property was returned to more than 18,000 claimants and the Treasurer's Office currently has over \$94 million waiting to be returned. Common types of unclaimed property include:

- Bank accounts and safe deposit box contents
- Stocks, mutual funds, bonds, and dividends
- Uncashed checks and wages
- Insurance policies, CDs, and trust funds
- Utility deposits and escrow accounts

If you would like to receive the unclaimed property listing, please send an e-mail to [al.laperle@vermont.gov](mailto:al.laperle@vermont.gov) or call 802-828-2407 or toll-free in Vermont at 800-642-3191. There is no charge to the owner for the recovery of these funds directly through the Treasurer's Office.

## H.688 – An Act Relating to Climate Change

H.688 – passed the Vermont House and is now before the Senate for consideration. The bill establishes the Vermont Climate Council which is responsible for analyzing and evaluating strategies and programs to ensure the reduction of Vermont's greenhouse gas emissions. The bill requires greenhouse gas reductions consistent with Governor Scott's Paris Agreement promise and VT's 2016 Comprehensive Energy Plan.

- 26% below 2005 emissions levels by 2025
- 40% below 1990 emissions levels by 2030
- 80% below 1990 emissions levels by 2050

The bill also includes a Cause of Action provision. This provision does not allow the State to be sued for damages but rather would force the Agency of Natural Resources to advance efforts to meet the emissions requirements.

Vermont has the highest level of greenhouse gas emissions per capita in the Northeast and is the only state whose emissions have increased in the last 30 years. These reduction requirements would be similar to other Northeastern states. Massachusetts passed a law over 10 years ago mandating less greenhouse gas pollution and has seen a 25 percent reduction in emissions, and a more efficient energy system. Connecticut, Maine and New York have all established a Global Warming Solutions Act and New Hampshire has a bill under consideration in its legislature. The House passed the bill on a vote of 105-37 and is in the Senate for consideration.

## Renter Rebate

The House Ways and Means Committee has worked to reform the renter rebate program. Renter rebate has long been a source of frustration for many. The goals of renter rebate reform include: simplifying the process; reducing the error rate of returns (currently at 66 percent). The House is working on a proposal to redefine income for this program, moving away from modified adjusted gross income, and to revise the program so that the landlord certificate is significantly simplified. To calculate rebate, the Committee proposes to use HUD numbers by county for both income and fair market value of rental properties to provide more consistency and fairness within the program. The bill has passed the House and is now in the Senate for consideration.

## Act 250

As Vermont has evolved over the past 50 years, so have the challenges facing our state. The proposed changes update and modernize Act 250, improve the permitting process and proposes initiatives to better protect Vermont's environment. The proposal maintains the current system of District Coordinators and District Commissions.

The bill supports development in downtown areas by lifting jurisdiction in certain designated growth areas (designated downtown development districts and neighborhood development areas) where Act 250 review may be duplicative with local regulations. This provision creates an incentive for growth in downtown areas and also provides a similar provision to lift jurisdiction for village districts with municipal plan, zoning and subdivision bylaws that include river corridor protection.

The proposed environmental/working land protections include:

- Expanding jurisdiction to better protect ecologically-sensitive high elevation areas, natural areas, and working lands;
- Expanding jurisdiction to address development around interstate interchanges;
- Adding criteria to protect forests and increase protections for wildlife habitat;
- Adding criteria to address climate change through transportation and energy criteria, and incentives to concentrate new development in our designated town centers;
- Improving protections for river corridors by requiring the Agency of Natural Resources to create a flood plain and river corridor permitting program that will increase resiliency in the face of more frequent, more intense flooding events brought about by a change in climate;
- Supporting the forest products industry through greater flexibility in permitted hours of operation and delivery of wood heat fuels.

Improved public participation is a focus of the legislation. A provision has been added to include a pre-application meeting to enhance public participation and to allow applicants and interested parties the opportunity to learn about and discuss a proposed project, identify issues, and reduce points of conflict before applications are finalized. The bill is now in the Senate for consideration.

### Pupil Weighting Study

The Senate Committee on Education will hold a public hearing on the Study of Pupil Weights in Vermont's Education Funding Formula. The hearing will be held Wednesday, March 11 from 4:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. in Room 11 of the State House in Montpelier. Written testimony can be emailed to: [testimony@leg.state.vt.us](mailto:testimony@leg.state.vt.us). Please indicate Pupil Weighting Study in the subject line.

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## Transportation Budget

The Transportation Budget proposed for fiscal year (FY) 2021 is a \$641 million program that funds transportation projects across the state. This reflects a \$25,510,077 increase over last year's budget. However, funding for town highway programs reflects a decrease over the FY 2020 budget, dropping from \$63.6M to \$62.1. This trend reflects a 10% decrease since FY19.

Last year, the General Assembly established a pilot Electric Vehicle (EV) incentive program that rolled out in December 2019. This program has already helped fund more than 50 new plug-in car purchases. The House is currently considering a \$3 million proposal by the Governor's to continue promoting EVs, including more public charging infrastructure. About 45 percent of Vermont's carbon emissions currently come from transportation and investing in EVs will help reduce carbon emissions.

### Minimum Wage

S.23 - The Minimum Wage bill calls for raising the minimum wage from \$10.96 to \$12.55 per hour by 2022. A poll conducted by VPR – Vermont PBS showed 41% of those polled supported raising the minimum wage to \$12.55 over the next two years; 33% of those polled believed the wage should be higher; and 22% supported leaving the minimum wage where it is now. This bill passed both the Senate and the House and was vetoed by the Governor. The Senate voted 24 to 6 to override the Governor's veto and on February 25<sup>th</sup> the House voted 100 – 49 to override the veto.

### Paid Family and Medical Leave

H.107 – The Paid Family and Medical Leave Insurance bill was passed by both the House and Senate and was vetoed in January by the Governor. The House held a vote to override the Governor's veto and was unsuccessful in its attempt on a vote of 99 – 51. Two-thirds of House members present was needed to override the veto. The bill would have guaranteed up to 12 weeks of paid parental or bonding leave and up to eight weeks of paid leave to care for family members.

### Vermont's Economy by the Numbers:

- The 42nd Annual National Movers Study, conducted by United Van Lines, showed in 2018 Vermont ranked #1 for highest percent of inbound moves.
- US News & World Report ranks Vermont as the 5th Best State based on more than 70 metrics.
- U.S. News ranks Vermont first for economic equality.
- At 2.2%, Vermont's unemployment rate is at an all-time low.
- According to the Small Business Administration Vermont has 77,83 small businesses and 158,098 small businesses employees.
- Vermont is 8<sup>th</sup> least expensive for personal auto insurance – 22.24% below the national average according to the National Association of Insurance Commissioners (NAIC).
- Vermont is 11<sup>th</sup> least expensive for homeowner's insurance, 21.88% below the national average according to NAIC.
- For the 4th consecutive year, Vermont has been named the healthiest state in the country by the United Health Foundation.
- Vermont consistently ranks as one of the happiest states in the Union.
- U.S. News ranks Vermont as one of the top states for health care access.