

2017

TOWN MEETING REPORT

Rep. Tom Stevens & Rep. Theresa Wood



This year marks the beginning of a new gubernatorial administration in Vermont, but the change at the top doesn't change the fact that this is the ninth year in a row that the Legislature has come to work in January with a substantial budget gap to close. With Democratic majorities in the House and Senate and a Republican as Governor, it would seem that the die is set for a contentious year. But we disagree. While Governor Scott has made proposals that are not palatable to many legislators, never mind school boards and superintendents, he has made proposals that diminish the divide between what we usually consider "partisan" and what is good for Vermonters as a whole. With our district having benefitted from the state getting behind us and supporting our recovery post-Irene, it is easy to believe that the way we worked together then has changed the tone in Montpelier. This is not to say that there will not be partisan battles that represent different ways of going about doing the best we can for Vermonters — there will be — but it is refreshing, compared to what we are witnessing on the national stage. As difficult as it may be in the coming months, we are proud of the achievements we are making on your behalf, and we are doubly proud and honored to be your voices in Montpelier. Thank you for your support.

— Tom & Theresa



UNCERTAIN TIMES

At the start of the new biennium, our work in the State House is usually filled with a combination of excitement, hopefulness, nervousness and reality. With 34 new representatives in the House, the changes in tone and make up are noticeable. For those of us who have served for some time, it is important to help the new legislators get up to speed on the issues before us.

And what are those issues this year? The budget, as always, is quite important. We are contending with a gap that is primarily the result of a difference in opinions in how government services should be funded. Governor Scott has made proposals that are attractive — increasing funding for our state colleges and for child care vouchers — but has asked to pay for them by using the property tax. We disagree with this notion, and we have started our work to reconcile those proposals with other ways of funding. Which is another issue, since, per the Governor's order, the proposed budget must require no new taxes or fees.

On the other hand, there has been a proposal to issue a bond for \$35 million, which would contribute to building necessary housing for low and middle income Vermonters. We agree with this notion. In fact, we've been advocating for such a bond for years. Repayment of the bond would come from the Vermont Housing and Conservation Fund, which is funded by the property transfer tax.

Our work also includes finding a way to fund the Clean Water Act, finding a way to fund the new Vermont Psychiatric Hospital, which will lose a substantial amount of federal funds by 2020,

finding a way to fund a paid family leave initiative, and finding a way to fund the rebuilding of our roads. We are working on sexual assault legislation, improving our recent work on education, and the potential legalization of marijuana.

All of this work is being done against the backdrop of what is happening in Washington DC. Rarely, if ever, has a new administration left Vermont with such uncertainty. Between pledges to cut program funding and new agency secretaries who are promising sweeping regulatory changes, your citizen legislators in Montpelier are doing your work without knowing what the immediate landscape will be. Some of the changes could impact special education money, free lunch for Vermont school children, housing vouchers, environmental protection funds and health care.

House Leadership has assigned a point person to keep tabs on these changes by collaborating with committee chairs, advocates and staff of our Congressional delegation to watch what is coming ahead. About 35% of Vermont's budget, including money for Dr Dynasaur, food stamps, safe drinking water investments and transportation funding, are reliant on federal grants. We know maintaining a strong and healthy Vermont will require us to act quickly in the event of major changes to these programs. A major part of our work this session is to be prepared to protect our strong economy and our most vulnerable by responding quickly to changes. Please stay in touch with us!

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STRENGTHENING VERMONT'S FAMILIES

Despite our growing economy, families are still struggling to get ahead. The House is currently exploring different policies, for example, raising the minimum wage and paid family insurance that would help create economic security for all Vermonters.

Raising wages enables Vermonters to better participate in our local economy, which will contribute to the health of our small businesses. It also helps in areas where people are struggling, like with the cost of childcare and housing. The several bills introduced have their strengths and weaknesses, and as we await the delivery of credible data, we are researching the potential effects of an increase extended over several years, from increased wages to the forced expiration of other benefits to the impact of the tipped minimum wage. We have received excellent testimony from local business owners, as well as from advocates. As well as many businesses seem to be doing, and as well as they treat their employees, it remains striking that approximately 85,000 Vermonters still work for the minimum wage, which is far too low to be considered a livable wage.

It's important to recognize the workforce has changed significantly over the past 50 years. Working families must make do with workplace policies that were implemented with the expectation that a woman would stay home to provide care for children or elderly family members. More than 70 percent of Vermont children under age six have all parents in the labor force, and the share of adult children providing care to aging parents has tripled over the past 15 years. A Family and Medical Leave Insurance program would allow Vermonters to have access to paid leave to take time to bond with or care for a new child, recover from a serious long-term illness or injury or care for a family member with a serious long-term illness or injury. A paid family insurance program could ensure that working families can balance work and family needs while maintaining economic security.

We have taken compelling testimony from small business owners who feel such a program would "level the playing field," as well as from opponents. The General, Housing and Military Affairs committee continues to study this issue and will determine whether they will vote on this bill before crossover.

CREATING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

In his budget address, Governor Scott said he wanted to create opportunities for all Vermonters and to protect vulnerable Vermonters. The values that underpin the work of the House Human Services Committee supports this vision: 1. Ensuring that vulnerable Vermonters are safe and protected; 2. Ensuring systems are maintained to assist Vermonters in moving out of poverty 3. Ensuring that we address problems and remove barriers that can lead to even greater costs to the State and 4. Ensuring that all Vermonters have access to services and supports that will enable them to attain their highest level of independence and realize their potential.

One tool to help Vermont kids in shelters was passed by the House last month. H.201 provides for an extension to the length of stay for minors from up to 7 days to up to 21 days. This change is consistent with federal regulations, has no budget impact, and would allow more intervention time with youth who are homeless, have run away or are otherwise disconnected.

In addition, the committee will be addressing how to bend the slope of benefits cliff and also preventing or mitigating the impact adverse childhood events. Addressing these issues can help move Vermonters out of poverty and create healthy communities.

The Human Service committee has also worked with the Appropriations committee to recommend changes in order to strengthen the Choices for Care program for eligible low income senior citizens and individuals with physical disabilities. The Choices for Care program gives people the opportunity to choose between home and community-based supports or nursing home care.

MARIJUANA

Current Vermont law uses civil fines to penalize individuals who are cited by law enforcement for possession of small amounts of marijuana. H.170 takes an incremental step towards legalization, by focusing on changes to the law for adult possession and cultivation. The bill removes all civil and criminal penalties for possession of up to one ounce of marijuana, keeps penalties in place for possession by individuals under 21 years of age, imposes penalties on those who enable minors to consume marijuana, allows for the limited growing of two mature and four immature marijuana plants limits the cultivation of plants by linking the allowed plants to a single property, rather than to an individual.

Youth prevention efforts continue to improve. We spend \$3.7 million on prevention; data supports the strategies we are choosing and validates the early impact of our redirected efforts. The choice to focus on legalization of limited adult personal possession, with the ability to grow your own modest supply, shifts the emphasis of our policy approach to marijuana.

Lastly, given that Massachusetts and Maine passed ballot initiatives to legalize and Canada will implement legalization later this year, this may be the most common sense approach to keep Vermont in step with our neighbors. We expect to see a vote on this bill soon.

Water Clean Up

Most Vermonters have heard that our impaired waters must be cleaned and we have agreed to work with the federal government to do so. The Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDL), which represents the amount of pollutants allowed to pass through our waterways and into our lakes, have been established for most waters statewide.

While the funding for clean-up is high, the cost of doing nothing is much higher.

The recent Clean Water Report is the document that guides our work. We are hearing from many witnesses saying they agree with the "all in" concept and expect a well-coordinated approach. Draft proposals continue to be updated in committee, which upon completion, will be presented to the House Ways and Means Committee for their consideration. Because the information necessary to properly implement a per-parcel fee based on acreage and/or impervious surfaces on the parcel will not be ready for a few years, we are looking at creating a working group to report back to the legislature on or before Jan. 15, 2018, on the best way to implement such a fee. Once established, some of the other funding sources that are used in the interim will sunset. This bill will likely continue to see revisions as it makes it way through the legislative process. We appreciate the comments we've heard about the potential impacts and we expect the conversation to remain thoughtful as we move forward.

IMPORTANT CONTACTS

State of Vermont Web Portal

www.vermont.gov

Vermont 211 Information

Dial 211 or www.vermont211.org

Vermont Health Connect

<https://portal.healthconnect.vermont.gov>