

2018

TOWN MEETING REPORT

Rep. Tom Stevens & Rep. Theresa Wood



Town Meeting break finds the Legislature working at a feverish pace. Second sessions of bienniums are always busier than the first, as we are more settled in and we are "picking up the ball". It is difficult to know in January exactly how the session will go. We prepare for what we know, and we did the same this year. What we could not anticipate was an event such as that which happened in Florida and, more importantly, didn't happen in Fair Haven. Up until then, we have been working in our respective committees, sorting out the issues relevant to our committees and to Vermonters. The budget and policy situations in Washington have made us focus on making sure Vermonters are not hurt by those situations. 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



LISTENING AND HEARING

We have been privileged, during our tenure representing you in the State House, to witness so many different and moving moments. Just a few days ago, dozens of Vermont high school students either took time from their classes or from their vacations to come to the State House and asked us to take action in the wake of the school shooting in Florida and the near miss in Fair Haven. They asked, in no uncertain terms, for the adults to act existing legislation that would make their homes and schools safer. We have never been immune to the threat of guns in schools — there was an event at Harwood several years ago where SWAT teams were called in during a lockdown, and we know of self-inflicted wounds having happened in other of our schools. Watching the passion, fear, courage and dignity of these students was a powerful moment for those of us who witnessed it. So many things changed that week, and Vermonters decided to put the lives of our students above our deep feelings and fears over gun violence. It put the rest of our committee work into a context that has, at least for the time being, transcended pure partisanship.

The following are thumbnail sketches of legislation that has either passed through the House or is still being considered. Legislation like this illustrates our core values — what we believe in most and what we think can best help Vermonters thrive during these tumultuous times. These bills are not yet law. Our End of Session Report will detail some of the many bills that will be signed into law.

PROTECTING VERMONT'S FAMILIES

Vermont families continue to face struggles, whether trying to raise and care for young children or making decisions about care of an older family member. The House continues to work hard to support families by dealing with issues related to childhood trauma, removing barriers for children in state custody to participate in normal childhood activities, and enabling the relevant State departments to evaluate child and youth deaths. We are doing whatever we can to reduce the occurrence of child and youth unexpected, unexplained and untimely deaths, including suicide. We are also paying close attention to the safety and quality of care older Vermonters receive in nursing homes. Making a decision to place a beloved family member in a nursing facility is an extremely difficult decision for families. Needing to make a change because a facility unexpectedly closes due to poor quality or insufficient financing requires families to relive those difficult decisions. We want to do whatever we can to minimize these occurrences.

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TREATING CRIME VICTIMS WITH RESPECT

We have spent many, many years making sure that crime victims be treated with respect, from the time a crime has been committed against them until they have had their time in court. While we are proud of the strides we have made, we have found a serious lapse in our commitment. Did you know that a crime victim can be fired for attending the trial or the court dates they need to attend in order to attain justice? Our employment law allows for an employer to fire an employee without cause, and in a few cases, we

have found that crime victims had to fight or were refused paid or unpaid time off in order to attend to their case in the court system. This seems terribly unfair and cruel. H. 711 addresses this by giving protected class status in employment law for victims of crimes, and it addresses their standing in our existing, if inadequate, family leave laws. This bill is relatively simple in its construction, but complex in its effects on how crime victims are treated at work at a time when they need understanding and the space to resolve difficult personal issues.

GUN VIOLENCE PREVENTION

When a young Vermonter was arrested in Fair Haven for plotting a school shooting, we learned that Vermont is not immune to the gun violence we have seen across the country. We learned that even in Vermont, a state looked to as a beacon of safety and hope, we were at risk for a devastating attack by an individual with guns. Thanks to the hard work of our local and state police, the threat was intercepted before tragedy could strike. Schools are a place of learning, a place to explore and grow and experiment. Children should not be afraid to go to school and parents should not be afraid to put their children on a bus. We should have the freedom to be safe in our homes, our neighborhoods and at work, without the constant threat of gun violence hanging over our heads. We've heard a variety of root causes of gun violence: irresponsible gun ownerships, mental health issues, and destabilized families. We have heard from high school students who have asked us to take them, their concerns and their fears seriously. To make our families, our schools, and our communities safer, we need to act. That's why we are working hard and taking action to pass gun safety laws to prevent gun violence. We welcome the humanity expressed by those who are now working with us — including the Governor and members of the Senate — to take swift, smart, nonpartisan and important action.

DATA BROKERS

Who didn't freak out last year when one of the biggest credit reporting agencies admitted that their servers had been breached and the personal and financial information for millions of Americans and thousands of Vermonters had been stolen? We did. With so much commerce and information stored online, we think the promise to protect it should be upheld. And so, in our "Data Brokers" bill, we are requiring those companies that sell this information to follow the same protocol that "data collectors" are required to do. We are requiring them register with the Secretary of State, to provide their opt-out provisions, and we're rescinding the fees currently charged to place and lift security freezes when a person's information has been compromised. This is a pure consumer protection bill, and will provide security for Vermonters in a way they deserve.

EFFICIENCY STANDARDS

Last year the House passed a bill to protect the efficiency standards that exist at the federal level, but were threatened by the Trump Administration and certain members of Congress. This year's legislation (H.410) takes a step further by adding eighteen new products to the State energy efficiency standards. In so doing, the State of Vermont joins thirteen other states in moving energy and water efficiency standards forward nationally. Additionally, this bill will cut Vermont's carbon dioxide emissions by 33,000 metric tons each year, which is the equivalent to the emissions of approximately 7,000 passenger cars per year. This supports Vermont's economy and Vermonters' pocketbooks by increasing average household savings in energy costs by over \$660 each year.

Proposed Tax Reforms

There are a number of major changes being proposed by the House Ways and Means Committee, most of them related to the income tax.

The committee is proposing that Social Security benefits for taxpayers with adjusted gross incomes under \$45,000, and couples under \$65,000, will be untaxed by Vermont. The benefit will phase out at incomes \$10,000 above these limits. This tax will help our seniors make ends meet, and will cost the state \$6.1 million, and we think the investment is worth it.

The committee has also proposed changes to the way we pay for education on a statewide level by reducing our reliance on the property tax. Details are still being discussed, and will be further when the bill goes to the Senate. At this time, statewide property taxes will be cut by over 40% and income taxes will be adjusted to raise funds for the education of our children. There will be an income tax indexed to people's ability to pay. In conjunction, all sales and use taxes would be shifted to the Education Fund. These changes will simplify the sources from which we pay for education and will make a closer connection between local taxpayers and their schools.

These proposals are not final yet, but they are the first ones in years that have been considered that reduce our reliance on the property tax and still remain constitutionally viable.

REP. TOM STEVENS

Vice Chair, General Housing & Military Affairs
12 Winooski Street
Waterbury, VT 05676
(802) 595-0429
tom@stevensvermont.com
www.stevensvermont.com

REP. THERESA WOOD

Clerk, Human Services
1461 Perry Hill Road
Waterbury, VT 05676
(802) 585-5202
twood@leg.state.vt.us

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