

2020 Town Meeting Report

Kimberly Jessup



It's an honor to serve as your State Representative. Last year, our work focused on creating a strong Vermont economy by making childcare more affordable and accessible for families, expanding broadband access, and protecting our environmental assets by funding cleanup of polluted rivers and lakes. This year, we are putting more money in Vermonters' pockets and combating climate change and building resilience for our communities. My priority is advancing policies that will enable our families and communities to thrive. Below is an update on recent action at the State House. As always, I thank you for making your voice heard and engaging in ways that make Vermont a great place to live.

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Global Warming Solutions Act (GWSA)

The House passed the Global Warming Solutions Act (H688) to build accountability into our systems of reducing greenhouse gasses. Climate change is not some distant threat. Vermont saw six storms that qualified for FEMA assistance in the 2000s. In the 2010s, the number grew threefold to 18. We are experiencing more power outages, gully washers, and ticks than ever before. Vermont set ambitious climate goals, but they have lacked teeth. GWSA establishes an accountability framework and directs the State to work with community experts to develop a roadmap for action. Taken together, these actions move our goals into action so we proactively adopt policy to address climate change. Passing H.688 by a vote of 105 to 37 in February, the House provided Vermont a framework to protect our citizens, reduce our emissions, and prepare for the impacts of climate change.

State Budget

As we enter March, the House Appropriations Committee (HAC) is working on the FY2021 budget covering the work and programs of state government from July 1, 2020 to June 30, 2021. To formulate a balanced budget, the Committee hears budget testimony from all three branches of government. HAC looks at new and old initiatives in terms of results-based accountability. Spending without a clear funding source necessary past FY2021 is scrutinized. HAC questions proposed reductions as well as increases, position changes, perceived program delivery hurdles, use of "one-time" money and "vacancy savings." Throughout, the HAC stays in touch with the respective policy committees. Advocacy groups are invited to enter testimony. Through nine regional public hearings, HAC reaches out to the public in general. Written testimony is always welcome.

Older Vermonters Act

The number of Vermonters over the age of 65 is projected to grow by 50 percent over the next decade. To be ready for this demographic shift and promote successful aging, H.611 would establish an Older Vermonters Act, detailing a system of services, supports, and protections for Vermont residents 60 years of age or older to remain as independent as possible into their later years. This "bill of rights" ensures that policy decisions relative to older Vermonters will help enhance their self-determination; safety and protection; financial security; optimal health and wellness; social connection and engagement; housing and transportation; and family caregiver support. The legislation includes development of a Master Plan for Aging in Vermont to serve as a blueprint for state government, local communities, private organizations, and philanthropy to build environments and systems that promote healthy aging. It also requires a process for registering all business organizations providing in-home services to older Vermonters not covered by Medicaid. Other features of the bill include a study committee to examine the issue of self-neglect in older Vermonters, as well as formal reporting on adult abuse and neglect complaints and investigations.

Criminal Justice Reform

Despite past progress in improved criminal justice outcomes, Vermont now faces some challenges in continuing to safely reduce corrections populations. We have started to see an increase in violent crime, overcrowded prison facilities, and critical gaps in how people within the corrections system with behavioral health needs are identified and connected to resources. To better understand the drivers of crime, recidivism and prison populations, the legislature enlisted the Council of State Governments (CSG) to lead work that included all branches of Government and stakeholders. This process is known as Justice Reinvestment II. CSG helped synthesize mountains of criminal justice data and, as a result, the House is working on legislation that will restructure furlough and parole to ensure better consistency and access to due process; strengthen policies to allow people to earn

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more time off their sentences for good behavior; strengthen connections to substance use disorder treatment and mental health services in the community, and develop re-entry housing that better fits the needs of people leaving prison. These policy changes and strategic investments seek to ensure more successful re-entry for those leaving prison as well as lower recidivism and re-incarceration rates, which are expected to result in both savings and greater public safety.

Building Strong Communities

We want a Vermont where our families and communities can thrive and where opportunities are accessible to everyone. With funding through the capital bill, the House annually allocates funding for the Building Communities Grant Programs – a program that helps build community and economic vitality throughout Vermont. These grants support capital investments in facilities and infrastructure to help communities preserve the state’s historic buildings, improve ADA accessibility, and address fire safety in recreational facilities, human service facilities, historic buildings, educational facilities, and cultural facilities. The grants require a 1:1 match, which helps communities leverage additional investment. Municipalities, schools, libraries and nonprofits can apply. For information, visit: <https://bgs.vermont.gov/commissioner/building-communities-grants>

Act 250 Reform

The House passed an Act 250 Modernization bill (H.926) by a vote of 88-52. The legislation seeks to update this land by adding criteria such as the protection of forest blocks, wildlife habitat, and river corridors. It seeks to influence settlement patterns by reducing sprawling development and facilitating development in our compact downtowns, villages, and neighborhoods through the lifting of Act 250 jurisdiction from designated downtown and village centers. The bill also addresses climate change through consideration of transportation, air pollution, and energy impacts of development. The protection of habitat functions provided by forests and river corridors is intended to make Vermont more climate change resilient. Where climate change has already impacted the forest products industry as the ground freezes and thaws episodically and unpredictably, the bill supports the industry through greater flexibility in permitted hours of operation and in delivery of wood heat fuels. In an effort to draw tourists to a state where travel on interstate highways highlights Vermont’s natural assets and funnels drivers to town centers, the bill would further expand Act 250 review to lands within 2000 feet of highway interchanges. The bill aims to foster sustainable trail development by clarifying when Act 250 applies and requiring recommendations about future trail management (among other matters) to be provided to the legislature by December 2020.

Minimum Wage

With the override of the Governor’s veto of S. 23 by a vote of 100-49, the House agreed to increase Vermont’s minimum wage. The bill raises the minimum wage to \$11.75 in 2021 and \$12.55 in 2022 and then ties increases to inflation in future years. The current minimum wage in Vermont is \$10.96.

Cannabis

Personal cultivation of cannabis was legalized in 2018. This year, the House passed a bill (S.54) to regulate cannabis businesses and tax cannabis sales to adults 21 years and older. The Cannabis Control Board (Board) would be an independent commission within the executive branch set up to regulate the adult-use. The Board would develop comprehensive rules, including rules governing licensing, financier disclosure, security, lab testing, health and safety, labeling, employee and licensee training, and seed to sale tracking. The Board would also license retailers, growers, product manufacturers, wholesalers, labs and integrated licensees. Applications for small growers would be prioritized over larger growers. Licensed small growers also would be able to sell their product to integrated licensees and medical dispensaries, including the time period before retail sales. Voters in cities and towns must vote to allow cannabis retailers. The cultivation, processing and manufacturing of cannabis must comply with all applicable state, federal and local environmental, energy or public health laws, including municipal regulation and zoning. Retail sales will be subject to a 14% cannabis excise tax and Vermont’s 6% sales tax. Instead of a local option tax, local communities could charge a local licensing fee to cannabis establishments. Thirty percent of the cannabis excise is dedicated to funding substance misuse prevention programming. All sales tax revenue is earmarked for grants to start and expand after school and summer learning opportunities.

Vermont’s Economy by the Numbers

- For the period covering December 2019, Vermont’s unemployment rate was 2.3 percent according to the Vermont Department of Labor.
- In 2019, according to the Small Business Administration, Vermont had 77,614 small businesses and 161,080 small business employees.
- United Health Foundation’s 2019 annual report listed Vermont as #1 for the healthiest state.