



Maida F. Townsend

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South Burlington, Chittenden 7-4**

As your Representative in the Vermont House, I take my responsibility to my South Burlington constituents very seriously. I encourage the citizens I represent to track my work on the Issues page at www.maidatownsend.org.

Plus, I invite you to talk to me, often...

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And don't forget you can visit with me at Trader Duke's on Saturday mornings, 8:30 to 9:30, at "my" table at the end of the booths by the front windows.

I hope you find this Report on legislative issues interesting and useful...

2017 Town Meeting Day Legislative Report

Vermont Budget Update

During the hard times of the recession, state government and businesses stepped up to partner with Vermonters to recover the economy while not forgetting vulnerable neighbors. This meant taking a hard look at government priorities and providing funding for those which met our core values.

The focus of the proposed House Fiscal Year 2018 budget continues to be supportive of growing the Vermont economy as well as looking out for the vulnerable among us. As an example, we continue to work to bring sustainability and stability to the budget by not paying for on-going expenses with money that is available only in the short term.

An unfortunate complication is the budget which Governor Scott proposed. It 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 costs, including money available for higher education,

teachers' retirement, and early child care, while transferring only \$86 million from the General Fund to cover this additional pressure. This leaves a gap of \$50 million to be paid by property taxes.

We are unwilling to be one of the few Legislatures in Vermont history to pass an unbalanced budget. Instead, we will be sending the Senate a balanced budget which continues to support a strong, healthy Vermont. That said, while insisting that our core values not be thrown to the side, the cuts necessary to bring about that balanced budget will be painful.

Farm-to-School.

The Roza McLaughlin Farm-to-School Program started with a dream and on a shoestring budget. It is now ten years old and continues to increase student access to healthy, local food, as well as creating growing markets for our local farmers. Farm-to-School gives schools up to \$15,000 to develop relationships with local farmers and producers. The students win by meeting the farmers, visiting their farms, learning

More...

about food production, and by eating healthily. S.33 proposes to extend this successful program so registered and licensed child care providers can apply for these grants. The bill has just arrived in House Agriculture and Forestry and will be taken up soon.

Updating Banking, Insurance, Corporate Laws

The House Commerce Committee has been working to update existing Vermont Statutes to make them consistent with the laws of other states, and to reflect the current legal and economic environment. Under review are laws dealing with regulations for Captive Insurance companies, insurance requirements for Transportation Network Companies (like Uber), the sharing of regulatory audits of financial institutions with other regulatory and industry agencies, and updating the Uniform Voidable Transactions Act. The committee is also updating the requirements of various lending entities. These include consumer litigation funding companies, mortgage loan originators, loan solicitation companies, and money servicers (like Western Union).

Focusing on Vermont Infrastructure

The House Committee on Corrections and Institutions has started work on its two-year budget. The committee is responsible for funding, through bonding, for state projects including but not limited to those related to state-owned buildings and land. One proposal under deliberation would give the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board up to \$8.5 million over two years to supplement funds from the Housing and Conservation Trust Fund. VHCB would be able to use these funds to save presently affordable housing from being lost, helping organizations plan and develop housing that will ease the housing crunch.

On a different note, the committee is also researching the best policy for creating or preserving prison space. Using the recently released Corrections Facilities Study Report, they

are looking at options that include the status quo, building a new in-state facility, or finding an out-of-state option. Our current contract with an out-of-state prison expires soon. (Please see the report regarding related work in the Judiciary Committee.)

Criminal Justice Reform

The House Judiciary Committee has focused on proposals to address problems in the State's criminal justice system. While continuing to protect the rights of crime victims and uphold public safety, the committee seeks to reduce negative impacts to individuals involved in the criminal justice system. The committee is vetting four different ideas around reform.

The first is looking at geographic justice, ensuring that every Vermonter, regardless of county of residence, has equal access to court and treatment options. The second is to review options to address over-incarceration and injustice due to bail policy. Often individuals may not have the resources to post bail and are incarcerated at a substantial cost to the State. In addition, individuals who cannot post bail may decide to plead guilty to an offense rather than remain incarcerated pending a hearing. The system works as a disservice to low-income Vermonters and is a poor use of the State's resources. Third is a policy to increase access to public defenders for youth 25 or younger. The fourth policy area being explored is "expungement." The collateral consequences of having a criminal record can prohibit someone from getting licenses, permits, or jobs. To reduce these collateral consequences, individuals who have fulfilled the terms of their sentence and have met other requirements may, after a waiting period, seek to have their criminal records erased.

Dam Safety.

Unsafe dams are causing more and more concern around the state. Some of these dams were built many years ago, when water power was important for mills and other industry. These

dams have long lost their purpose but still collect or impound a lot of water, often creating ponds that are enjoyed by the property owners. While it seems that the dams have “always” been there, the truth is that they are an unnatural manipulation of the land, their safety is unknown, and many are not inspected.

H.92 would require that all dams in the state be registered with the Department of Environmental Conservation. DEC is naturally concerned about the added work required, which would include inspecting the dams once they are registered, but many engineers and citizens around the state are concerned about their safety. A dam breach would be catastrophic for downstream properties and life. The bill addresses these public safety issues and has received support from many stakeholders.

Water Clean-Up Funding

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 the Lake Champlain Watershed, the Memphramagog Watershed, and the Connecticut River Watershed. Almost the entire state is under a TMDL requirement.

While the funding for clean-up is high, the cost of doing nothing is much higher. The Clean Water Report, issued by the State Treasurer’s Office on January 15, is the document that guides the work of the House Natural Resources and Fish and Wildlife Committee. They are hearing from many witnesses who say 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 any time soon, the committee is looking at

creating a working group to report back to the Legislature on or before January 15, 2018 regarding the best way to implement such a fee. If a per-parcel fee is subsequently established, other funding sources that are used in the interim will “sunset,” meaning “no longer exist” for that purpose. The latest iteration of the draft has deleted the “sunset” on the property transfer tax, allowing this funding to continue as a source of revenue for the Clean Water Fund.

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.

Boosting Career and Technical Education

Vermont’s career and technical centers (CTE) are dedicating increasing numbers of 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 CTE programs are funded so as to enhance accessibility. Helping students to find their passion, and giving schools the right tools to help them, is a focus of the committee's work this session.

Portable Employment Benefits for Contingent Workers

As employers and employees seek new ways to make the employment relationship more flexible, they have increasingly relied on a variety of arrangements popularly known as "contingent work." Workers may be considered "contingent" if they are not considered permanent employees. Contingent workers include temporary employees, leased employees, home workers, freelance workers, consultants, or individuals classified as independent contractors. Contingent workers are the base of the "gig economy."

Seasonal and cyclical labor demands for employers and balancing work/family time for workers create opportunities for contingent work. On the other hand, contingent workers often receive less pay and benefits than traditional full-time or "permanent" workers, and they are less likely to benefit from the protections of labor and employment laws. The House Commerce Committee and the House General Committee have long sought, separately and together, a way to balance existing worker protections with the emergence of the contemporary gig economy. These committees are framing a significant study that would lead to a plan for benefits to move with employees throughout their work life in Vermont. Making a gig economy work fairly for everyone would be a huge step forward for a stronger and healthier economy in Vermont.

Strengthening our Mental Health System

Integrating mental health care into our care system — parity — is of utmost importance to the House Health Care committee. The committee is focusing their research on the pressures related to our mental health care system, from

inappropriate wait times for patients awaiting psychiatric care in our emergency rooms to lowering the barrier to access to psychiatric in-patient beds. They have taken moving testimony from police officers and mental health workers who encouraged strengthening the state's crisis response services. To add to the complexity of this crisis, there is a high turnover of mental health workers due to stress, long hours, and non-competitive salaries.

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 support 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 ostensibly small but important tool to help Vermont youth in shelters was passed by the House last month. H.201 provides for an extension of the length of stay for minors from up to 7 days at a shelter to up to 21 days at the shelter. 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.

The committee is presently addressing how to bend the slope of the "benefits cliff." They are also working on how to best prevent and/or mitigate the impact of adverse childhood events. Success on these efforts can help move more Vermonters out of poverty and create healthier communities.