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**Greetings!** Please find below updates about pieces of legislation currently being debated and developed by the General Assembly that I think may be important for folks. Please reach out with any questions or concerns or other input.

### **Mid-Year FY23 Budget Adjustment**

The Budget Adjustment Act (BAA), the way the legislature makes mid-year adjustments and changes to the current year's budget, also provides, when available, additional funds for one-time urgent needs. The FY 2023 BAA ([H.145](#)) has been sent to the Governor and included additional investments in housing and supportive services, broadband that leverages federal grant funds, technical assistance for rural communities to access federal pandemic recovery and infrastructure funds, and IT improvements for the Vermont courts.

### **Universal School Meals**

During the pandemic, the federal government provided free school meals to all K-12 students. Last year, the legislature provided state funding to continue offering universal school meals. This year, the legislature is debating whether Vermont can and should make universal school meals permanent. Reasons for doing so include greater predictability for schools in meal planning and purchasing, less stigma for students, and increased partnerships and economic benefit for local farms. Several Vermont schools have also observed positive impacts on health and behavioral outcomes. Potential drawbacks include cost; however, it seems that continuing this program will allow Vermont to utilize new financial management strategies that access federal funding through increased student participation and a new Medicaid eligibility criterion. Read more about [H.165](#).

### **School Construction/Rehabilitation**

The House Education committee is considering ways to address the statewide backlog of renovation or replacement of school buildings. Prior to the Great Recession of 2007-08, the state of Vermont contributed 30% of the cost of school construction projects. A moratorium was implemented in 2007, and Vermont is currently the only New England state not providing state assistance for school construction. Vermont is conducting a statewide assessment of school facilities is currently underway with a completion deadline of October 2023. In addition, the legislature's education committee is studying school construction models being used in Maine, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Wyoming. Given Vermont's small, mostly rural population, the RIDE (Rhode Island Department of Education) School Construction Program may be the closest guide for what Vermont could do. The Rhode Island rubric provides a minimum state match of 35%, with certain projects being eligible for greater state-level support. Once projects are completed, districts are required to spend 3% of their budget annually on maintenance.

### **Workforce Development**

Most folks are aware that we workforce development is a high need in Vermont. The legislature is currently focusing especially on the healthcare, construction, and education sectors. So far to address these needs, the House Commerce Committee has taken steps to revise the nurse

## TOWN MEETING DAY REPORT 2023 – REPRESENTATIVE KATE NUGENT

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preceptor grants program through the FY23 Budget Adjustment Act, as well as working in a cross-committee group to expand teacher retention and hiring incentives.

### **Youth Mental Health**

Youth mental health across the state is an ongoing concern, and the House Education committee is working to understand how best to strengthen schools and mental health agencies' ability to address this critical need. Currently, Vermont school communities are experiencing a very high level of mental health needs and encountering capacity challenges in meeting the current demand for services. Two of the compounding issues contributing to this are limitations of financial resources as federal dollars begin to dry up and workforce shortages. Some of the potential solutions the legislature is considering include increasing funding to mental health agencies, incentives to enter the mental health field, decreasing barriers to licensure, expanding programs through the Community College of Vermont and the University of Vermont that allow workers to "upskill" into the mental health professions.

### **Climate Action: Conservation & Resilience**

As the climate changes, strategic conservation of land and water has become increasingly urgent to protect biodiversity and ensure continued ecological and economic benefits from a resilient and connected landscape. Vermont's wetlands, shorelands, and forests are home to all manner of wildlife, recreation, and working lands. While we have robust conservation science, tools, and partners, more planning is needed to guide future conservation efforts and resources and meet the conservation goals called for in the state's Climate Action Plan.

The legislature's "30x30" bill, H.126, requires the Agency of Natural Resources to develop a plan to permanently conserve 30% of our landscape by 2030 and 50% by 2050. Currently, roughly 26 percent of Vermont is conserved in a way that aligns with this bill. More than 100 countries, including the United States, have signed onto 30x30 goals. Three categories of conservation are defined in the bill, ranging from working lands to passively managed lands for old forest. To chart a path for accomplishing these goals, the Agency of Natural Resources will direct a planning process that includes broad input from regional and local entities as well as an updated inventory of conserved lands.

### **Bottle Bill 2.0**

Updating and expanding Vermont's bottle bill — first enacted in 1972 — will help reduce landfill waste, litter, and greenhouse gas emissions by increasing the amount and quality of plastic, aluminum and glass recycling. Although Vermont has a high recycling rate thanks to the universal recycling law, returnable bottles and cans dropped off at redemption centers around the state produce more marketable and reusable materials than what gets tossed into our commingled recycling bins. As the number and variety of beverages has increased tremendously, H.158 proposes a needed expansion of the decades-old deposit system that will cover most beverages, including plastic water bottles and glass wine bottles. To fund more conveniently located redemption centers, provide fair compensation to redemption center owners, and keep an increasing number of bottles and cans out of the landfill each year, the bill requires that beverage manufacturers and distributors collaborate in a stewardship program overseen by the Agency of Natural Resources that will address the limits of the current system.

### **Paid Family and Medical Leave Insurance**

Arguably one of the most important and impactful policy changes being debated and developed this year, Paid Family and Medical Leave Insurance, [H.66](#), recently passed out of the General & Housing Committee, is very different from the bill passed in the House three years ago.

H.66 contains three main provisions of equal importance: total job protection, benefits that include 100% pay for those earning the state average wage, and ample leave time. Significantly, this year's proposed benefit is portable; it follows the employee rather than remaining with the employer.

Paid leave covers varying periods of leave time for an employee or family member's serious health conditions, or recovery from serious health conditions (including rehabilitation); miscarriage; residential treatment for substance use disorder; childbirth and child bonding; military exigency, which allows a servicemember or their family to prepare for active duty or call to active duty; and bereavement (with a separate amount of time for those administering an estate). The bill also covers "safe leave" for medical care, counseling, or social or legal services, when an employee or family member is a victim of domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking.

Under the bill, employers and employees would share the insurance premium costs equally through relatively small payroll contributions, ensuring a valuable benefit at predictable cost to employers. Initially, employers (including small businesses) would pay less than 0.27% of wages, up to a cap. The bill is currently under consideration in the House Ways & Means committee.

### **Expanding and Enhancing our Health Care Workforce through Interstate Licensure Compacts**

Licensure compacts are mutual agreements that allow a licensed health care provider to work, via telehealth or in-person, in member states under the same, home-state license. Without these compacts, health care providers have to apply for separate licenses in any additional states they treat patients, which often is costly and time-consuming. Relevant bills recently advanced in the House Health Care Committee will allow mental health counselors ([H.62](#)), physical therapists ([H.77](#)), audiologists, and speech-language pathologists ([H.86](#)) in Vermont to join existing multi-state licensure compacts for their respective professions. These compacts will allow Vermont providers to help patients in many other states, and they continue ongoing treatment for people who move out of Vermont. Patients in Vermont will be able to receive treatment from thousands of providers in other compact-member states.

### **Suicide Prevention**

In preparation for crafting suicide prevention bills, we were privileged to hear from some of the bravest and most sincere witnesses — family members of those irreplaceable Vermonters lost through suicide, in addition to experts and academics who study this tragic phenomenon. The facts are heartbreaking: More than 700 Vermont residents died of gunshot wounds in the decade from 2011 to 2020. 88% of these deaths were suicides. Children are 4.4 times more likely to die by suicide in a home with a firearm compared to a home without a firearm. Suicide among Vermont men and boys is 50% higher than the national average. Persons at greatest risk of suicide in Vermont are men, persons living in rural areas, persons with a disability, veterans, and members of the LGBTQ+ community. There are few bright spots in the statistics, but one is this: 90% of the people who attempt a suicide, and survive, do not try again. However, suicide by firearm almost never allows this opportunity for a second chance at life.

[H.230](#) attempts to reduce suicide by lethal means with three distinct strategies. One, mandating the safe storage of firearms in places where they might be accessed by children and those legally ineligible to possess them. Two, instituting a mandatory waiting period for the purchase of firearms. Most suicides are impulsive acts, and having a bit of time to cool off will save lives. Three, extension of our current extreme risk protection order law to include family members. Following the work on H.230, the committee will focus on additional suicide prevention methods.

### **Child Care and Early Childhood Education**

The lack of affordable, high-quality early childhood education profoundly impacts Vermont and its economy. As introduced, H. 208, an act relating to child care and early childhood education, develops a blueprint for a significant investment in our children, families, and communities. The bill, with tri-partisan and widespread support, would significantly increase state-funded financial assistance for children in child care; expand the current funding for part-time pre-K to a full-time program for all 4-year-olds in Vermont; increase compensation for early childhood educators and financial support for community and home-based child care programs by reimbursing centers for enrollment; and elevate and streamline state-level oversight of early childhood education.

### **Transformational Investments in Transportation**

This year's Transportation Bill — nicknamed the T-Bill — will provide more than \$850 million in funding for transportation policies that go beyond the basics of road maintenance, upgrades, and snow removal. The House will recommend using these funds to support transportation greenhouse gas reductions, bike and pedestrian infrastructure, and public transportation that serves both urban and rural communities. The federal bipartisan Infrastructure Investments and Jobs Act (IIJA) funds, which will total \$1.6B over five years, will provide Vermont the opportunity to make transformational investments in our transportation infrastructure and address climate change.

### **Transportation Plans for Vibrant Communities**

Vermont's historic village and downtown centers provide "great bones" for walkable compact lifestyles. The transportation bill includes funding for the Downtown Transportation Fund (DTF) and the Better Connections Program, making these areas more pedestrian, bike, and transit friendly. This competitive grant program is administered by the Vermont Department of Housing and Community Development and will provide awards up to \$200,000 with a required 20% community match. Additional resources available to communities seeking to improve livability, walkability, safety, economic vitality, and community vibrancy include Animating Infrastructure grants through the Vermont Arts Council and the Better Places Program through the Agency of Commerce and Community Development.

### **Education Funding and Property Appraisals**

The real estate market has fluctuated in recent years, as many folks know. The Committee on Ways & Means has spent the first two months of the legislative session looking at a wide range of ways to bring this system into alignment. The committee heard testimony on several innovative solutions including a consistent statewide system for property appraisals and not relying on property taxes for education funding. The legislature's goal is to try to identify a more consistent system and avoid big changes that catch property owners by surprise, and also relieve pressure on municipalities to manage appraisals with limited resources.