**Montpelier Notes,**  An occasional email for Pownal and Woodford residents. If you would prefer not to receive these notes please reply to botzow@sover.net and I'll remove you from the list. If you would like to be added please let me know. I do not give your email address to others. --Bill Botzow

February 7, 2010

Hello All,

On the first Sunday morning of the month the Pownal American Legion offers its all you can eat breakfast and I enjoy seeing many community members there with friends and neighbors. It is a good time to catch up on our friends’ doings and hear what people are thinking about and what may be coming in the month ahead. Community gatherings bring us together and remind us who we are. If you have never been to the legion, the food and company are good and so is the view from the dining room. The mountains across the valley on a sunny winter Sunday like today sparkle and remind us of the many years people have made their lives here. If you go up to Woodford it is the same feeling. Traces of farms, old roads and timber operations remind us of all that has gone on before us and how the land holds us together now and through time. Sunny, still winter Sundays with the light reflecting off the snow seem especially timeless and for me express a feeling of home like few other times of year. Although times are hard for many in our towns, we are still lucky to be here.

                This week in Montpelier work continues in Committees as we take testimony on bills before voting them out. Only one bill came to the floor and it was a technical corrections bill to the sex-offender registry. The Senate acted first on this bill and the House made a few changes before returning the bill to them for agreement.

**S. 163 An act relating to technical corrections to 2009 sex offender legislation**

Every year for the past few years the legislature has acted to strengthen sex offender law. This year’s bill adjusts policy on taking depositions especially from young witnesses. It also makes technical corrections to policy on posting sex offender information on the on-line registry. The goal of the bill is to clear up ambiguities so public safety can continue to work towards safer communities.

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                This was my first full week as a committee chair and in this Montpelier Notes I thought I would try to give you a picture of legislative committees where the real heart of the work of the legislature takes place. If you come to Montpelier make sure to visit a committee room when we are working on bills. The committee rooms are relatively small. In the House the rooms are about 12 by 25 feet with a table or facing rows of desks in the middle. Legislators sit in their chosen seat for the session. The Chair is at the end, usually with the Vice-Chair of the Committee on their left and the Clerk on the right. At the other end of the table is a chair for the witness. There is also a small desk for a staff person. All the proceedings are recorded and anyone can ask for a CD of any witness. The Chair, working with the Vice-Chair, sets the Agenda for the week. We start hearing from people at about nine in the morning and go until about four o’clock with a break for lunch and for some time each day on the floor of the House where the work of committees is presented, debated and passed. Here’s a sampling of last week’s work in Commerce.

                On Tuesday morning we continued work on H.647, a bill concerning worker’s compensation misclassification. An example of misclassification is when a worker is treated as an independent contractor when they should be classified as an employee. When workers are misclassified everybody who is following the rules pays more into the worker’s compensation fund. The bill gives the Department of Labor more tools to work with to make sure there is a level playing field for all. We spent the morning hearing from first the Department of Labor on their views on the bill and then from advocates for the bill. The committee listens carefully, taking turns asking questions and looking for places of agreement and disagreement. After we hear from a full range of witnesses we will address the issues that have been identified and make changes to the bill before voting it out of committee. We make sure to allow time between hearings so people can ask to be heard and comment on the testimony. As well as setting the agenda, it is the Chair’s job to make sure everybody gets a chance to ask their questions and to keep the committee on time. The chair also delegates some of the work of the committee, especially when committee members need to represent the committee on similar issues in other committees.

                Tuesday afternoon we took testimony on  H.622. This bill makes sure that when people apply for loans and a credit check takes place their application information goes to a central clearing house. Federal law allows the sale of that information. Often when the person comes home they start to receive many calls from lenders. This competition is fair and good but often the company on the phone won’t say how they got the information and people think their local bank has sold the information which can lead to bad feelings. The bill requires that when a call is placed the caller has to disclose where they got the information and make it clear that they did not get the information from the local lender.

Wednesday the committee exercised its oversight authority of the Vermont Economic Progress Council. This council currently decides tax credit awards. We first wanted to review their work in the previous year and then we wanted to consider the Council’s history as it used to be the economic planning group for Vermont. Vermont needs good long range economic development planning and we think the planning should take place in the Agency of Commerce and Community Development. We also think the planning should be based on good data so that the small amount of tax payer money spent in this area is used wisely. In this time of deep cuts we think it is time to look at how we go about economic development and carefully design a better more cost effective system that can help provide good jobs and help local communities in their efforts to improve the local tax base.

                In the afternoon we took testimony on bonding. This is a complex area and a number of new forms of bonding at very low rates are available to Vermont communities as part of economic recovery efforts.

                Thursday the Committee took up broadband issues. In 2007 the administration asked for legislation to create a Telecommunications Authority to help make broadband and cell coverage available to all of Vermont. We heard from the companies that provide these services, Comcast, Fairpoint, and the Independent telephone companies on their progress. The news in Woodford and Pownal is mixed. Woodford is now covered by Comcast as of the beginning of the year. However cell coverage needs work. Pownal has many back roads waiting for Fairpoint DSL service and though Comcast covers most of the main and secondary roads, there are areas where that choice is not likely because population density is low. We also heard that many of the first round of grants for stimulus funding that would have brought end of the road service to much more of Vermont have been turned down. Last year we heard from the administration that they thought Vermont was well organized to succeed in this area and it was one of a few priority applications for them. There is a second round coming, but we are concerned that the Telecom Authority has not lived up to potential in this critical area for economic development.

                In the afternoon the Committee took testimony on a bill that would lay out a homeowner’s bill of rights for people living in common interest ownership arrangements. These are condominiums, homeowner associations and cooperatives. This is a model bill that would apply evenly to all states and is adapted state-by-state across the country. The bill would make sure that common sense rights were followed such as the ability to be warned of meetings, to be able to vote, and to have access to records. In some communities these basic rights are not being followed. I’m sure you can imagine the problems that arise.

                Friday the committee took testimony on two bills important to Woodford and similar rural communities. H.527 and H.559 would help communities recover costs of fire department response and hazardous material cleanup costs. Rural towns on major transportation routes often are stuck with an unfair portion of the bill.

                On Friday the Vice-Chair ran the meeting as I had to be at UVM as a legislative Trustee. Committees are set up so people can have some flexibility and a sign of a good committee is when they work well together.

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**Fiscal Year 2011 Budget Hearing:**

Every year the appropriations committees in the legislature use the Vermont Interactive Television system to hold hearings so people from across the state have a chance to testify on their priorities.

The Public hearing is **Monday February 8 from 4:30pm to 7:00pm.** In Bennington the VIT site is at the Senior Citizen’s Service Center at 124 Pleasant Street.

Appropriations Committee members Senator Sears and Rep. Miller of Shaftsbury are expected to attend in Bennington along with interested members of the public.

**Directions to the Bennington-VIT Site**

**From the North:** Take Rt. 7 or 7A South to Bennington. Continue South on Rt. 7 past the Bank of Bennington. Make a left before the traffic light onto Pleasant Street. Then make a right into the large municipal parking lot across from the Senior Citizens Center. VIT is located in the Senior Center. Go in the main entrance to the waiting lobby, and then through the door on the right. VIT is at the end of the short hallway.

**From the South:** Take Rt. 7 North to Rt. 9 (Main Street) in Bennington. Make a right at Pleasant Street. Then make a right into the large municipal parking lot across from the Senior Citizens Center. VIT is located in the Senior Center. Go in the main entrance to the waiting lobby, and then through the door on the right. VIT is at the end of the short hallway.

**From the East:** Take Rt. 9 West to Bennington. In Bennington, Route 9 becomes Main Street. At the 4 corner intersection with Route 7, turn right, then another right at Pleasant Street. Then make a right into the large municipal parking lot across from the Senior Citizens Center. VIT is located in the Senior Center. Go in the main entrance to the waiting lobby, and then through the door on the right. VIT is at the end of the short hallway.

**From the West:** Take Rt. 9 East to Bennington. In Bennington Route 9 becomes Main Street. At the 4 corner intersection with Route 7, turn left, then right at Pleasant Street. Then make a right into the large municipal parking lot across from the Senior Citizens Center. VIT is located in the Senior Center. Go in the main entrance to the waiting lobby, and then through the door on the right. VIT is at the end of the short hallway.

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I received the following announcements from Charlie Gingo, the Agency of Human Services Field Director for Bennington County. I hope they are helpful to you or someone you know.

FREE RADON TEST KITS: The U. S. Surgeon General recommends that your home be tested for radon. Radon is the second leading cause of lung cancer; and if you have never smoked, radon is the number one cause. Radon is an invisible radioactive gas that can seep into your home from underground, and the only way you can tell if you have dangerous levels of radon in your home is to test for it. Radon problems can be easily fixed. For testing information, call 1-800-439-8550 or visit [www.epa.gov/radon](http://www.epa.gov/radon). Free long-term radon test kits are available at [http://healthvermont.gov](http://healthvermont.gov/). Click on “Radon Awareness” at the top of the page and follow the instructions.

SHAREHEAT FUND: Central Vermont Public Service Corporation and other generous partners and customers donate and raise funds for the Shareheat program every year. The Shareheat Fund is managed by BROC in Bennington County. Shareheat can pay for a minimum fuel delivery or electrical assistance. Shareheat also can help with minor heating system repairs. If a person or family is below 200% of the federal poverty level ($1806/month for one person; $3676/month for a family of four) or has an extenuating need, they may be eligible for the program. For more information, call BROC in Bennington at 447-7515.

SUPPORT OUR TROOPS: During February and March, the Chittenden Bank is collecting items to send to our Vermont soldiers. You can drop off items at your local Chittenden branch for donation to the Vermont National Guard. Some of the most commonly requested items include: batteries (AAA, AA, or C), instant coffee, phone cards, lip balm, energy bars, toiletries (toothbrushes, toothpaste, shaving cream, etc.), peanuts and mixed nuts, card games, beef jerky, baby wipes, canned tuna, etc.

H1N1 FLU VACCINE CLINIC: The Vermont Department of Health in Bennington will be holding another H1N1 Vaccination Clinic this month. The date is Thursday, February 18. The clinic will run from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. and will be held at the Health Department, 324 Main Street, Bennington. The clinic is open to anyone 6 months of age or older. Nasal vaccine as well as shots will be available. Please call 447-3531 for an appointment or with questions.

SEASONAL FUEL PROGRAM ENDS FEBRUARY 28: If you know anyone who may be eligible but has not applied for the 2009-2010 Seasonal Fuel program, please encourage them to apply by February 28. This is the last day to apply for the program this heating season. BROC administers the Seasonal Fuel program in Bennington County. For more information, call BROC at 447-7515.

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I am including an article from a member of the Health and Services Committee that lays out some of the legislature’s budget challenges this year.

Human Services by Rep. Patsy French

We have been getting information from departments in the Agency of Human Services about their budget cuts. The cuts will have a profound effect on the lives of many seniors, children, individuals with a variety of disabilities, and families with low incomes. To make matters worse, many of the people affected by cuts in one department will be negatively impacted by cuts in other departments as well. These are the Vermonters with the least capacity to deal with fewer services and supports from the State. I will mention some of the cuts to give you a feel for what our constituents will be facing.

Our senior citizens and Vermonters with disabilities have a right to live as safely and as independently and with as much dignity as possible. The Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living (DAIL) provides a variety of services to Vermonters who are over the age of 60 or who have a disability. There are many proposed reductions and eliminations in the FY ’11 budget. These cuts are to programs that provide supportive housing services to seniors thereby helping them to stay out of nursing homes, that support Adult Day Care, that assist in home access modifications for those with disabilities, that affect blind and visually impaired Vermonters, that affect individuals with developmental disabilities and their families, that affect Vermonters with disabilities who need help from Vocational Rehabilitation in order to be employed.

Vermont children should not have to live in poverty. The Reach Up program in the Department of Children and Families (DCF) helps Vermont families with children by providing cash assistance for basic needs and services that support work and self-sufficiency. It is Vermont’s program to move families out of poverty. It is funded with state general funds and the federal Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) block grant. One of DCF’s stated priorities for 2010 is to strengthen Reach Up. There are, however, reductions proposed for Reach Up programs in the FY ’11 budget and some proposed policy changes. Proposed reductions include 3% less money for grants, which pay for things such as case management at parent child centers, and for support services, which, for example, could pay for car repairs which would enable the recipient to get to work. The Post Secondary Education program helps Reach Up participants who want to get a college degree. One aspect of the program which has really helped its participants succeed is having an on campus case manager to help solve problems that arise. Funding for those on campus case managers is proposed to be eliminated. One proposed policy change would eliminate the recently implemented Reach Ahead program. This program is proving to be effective in helping families who have been able to move out of Reach Up, to stay out of Reach up by giving them a small amount of support for a limited time. Several other policy changes would have a strong negative impact for the children and families affected.

There are many difficulties associated with raising a child with special needs. The proposed Health Department budget would cut services that can be extremely important to those families. Other proposed cuts would affect individuals who need kidney dialysis, who use syringe exchange programs, and who have AIDS, to name a few.

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Human Services is just one of the many areas facing deep cuts. You can see what difficult choices we face in our need to find 150 million dollars to balance the budget.

If you’re watching the Super Bowl this evening I hope your team does well and that it is a good game.  Have a great week.

Stay in touch,

Bill

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