

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 26, 2012

Hello All,

Well, looks like winter finally showed up this weekend with snow and wind followed by a cold night. The drive home Friday night was longer than usual with vehicles moving slowly and some having a hard time getting over Mendon Mountain on RT 4 near Rutland. The heavy wet snow made for slippery going, but fortunately there weren't too many cars off the road and none that I saw appeared serious.

We were on the floor much of the week with the Fee bill and the Health Exchanges bill along with other measures. Here's what passed the House last week.

H. 634 An act relating to remedies for failure to pay municipal tickets

This bill would allow civil contempt proceedings and referral of debt to a collection agency for unpaid municipal tickets. This will streamline the courts and make more accountable the process of collecting parking and similar tickets. After committee review it passed the floor on a voice vote as a non-controversial measure.

H. 760 An act relating to lowering to 16 the age of consent for blood donation

The Health and Human Services Committee unanimously recommended this bill to lower the age you can give blood from 17 to 16. This would only be to voluntary blood donation programs and no compensation would be allowed. This will help with blood shortages. This bill also passed unanimously on a voice vote.

H. 753 An act relating to encouraging school districts and supervisory unions to provide services cooperatively or to consolidate governance structures

This bill “proposes to delete the requirement that each supervisory union board vote by October 2012 whether to perform a comprehensive analysis of merger; redesign the system of incentives provided to school districts and supervisory unions that enter into agreements to provide services jointly or to consolidate governance structures; clarify existing statutory language regarding the process to change provisions in the final report creating a union school district; and create a working group to plan the 2015 implementation of employment of all special education staff by supervisory unions.”

Overall, the bill continues the work the legislature and school districts have undertaken to encourage cooperation among or consolidation of school districts. It also includes financial incentives for schools to undertake this work. After defeating an amendment that would have reversed some of the work passed in a bill last year, the bill passed on a unanimous voice vote.

H.753 responds to local boards desire to expand options that would improve schools and save money. For many schools, they found that the Regional Educational Districts model the legislature asked for wasn't a good fit but other ideas could work. The bill has no mandates and local districts have control. The bill facilitates local decisions and options.

H. 761 An act relating to executive branch fees, including motor vehicle and fish and wildlife fees

This year the fee bill will be presented in two separate bills. H.761 was the first fee bill and it passed 111 to 30 and I voted yes. The increases were modest and a few fees were decreased.

H. 365 An act relating to designating skiing and snowboarding as the official state sports

The title of the bill well describes the purpose of this measure. I'm including the findings section because it makes for interesting reading about Vermont's connection to these two sports.

“In recognition of the importance that sports and fitness can play in the personal lives of Vermonters and in the economic well-being of the state, the general assembly finds:

(1) The history of skiing and snowboarding is heavily linked to Vermont.

(2) In 1934, the country's first ski area opened near Woodstock when the first rope tow ski lift was installed on Clinton Gilbert's farm. This was followed by many other historical Vermont firsts in the ski industry, including the nation's first ski race which was held on Mount Mansfield in 1934, the nation's first J-bar lift which was installed at Bromley Ski Area in 1936, the nation's first ski patrol which was established at Stowe Ski Area in 1936, the nation's first T-bar lift which was installed at Pico Peak Ski Area in 1940, and the nation's first major chair lift which was installed at the Stowe Ski Area in 1940.

(3) In 1938, C. Minot Dole founded the National Ski Patrol in Vermont. Dole later used the National Ski Patrol model to convince the U.S. Army to activate a division of American mountain soldiers on skis, known as the 10th Mountain Division. Approximately 240 Vermonters served in the famed winter warfare division during World War II, with a dozen killed in action in the battle against the Germans in the Italian Alps.

(4) In 1952, Rutland's Andrea Mead-Lawrence, whose parents ran Pico Mountain, became the first American woman to win two Olympic gold medals in skiing. Stowe's Billy Kidd won the silver medal at the 1964 Innsbruck Olympics and the gold and bronze medals at the 1970 World Championships. The skiing Cochrans—Barbara Ann, Lindy, Marilyn, and Bobby—from Richmond dominated the world racing scene in the 1960s and 1970s, with Barbara Ann winning the gold medal at the 1972 winter Olympics. Nordic skier Bill Koch, from Brattleboro, skied in four Olympics—1976, 1980, 1984, and 1992. Koch won the 1976 silver medal, a first for an American Nordic skier, a bronze medal in the 1982 Federation Internationale de Ski Nordic World Championships, and a bronze medal in the 1982 World Cup Championships. Most recently, at the 2010 Winter Olympics, Hannah Kearney of Norwich won the gold medal in the women's freestyle skiing event.

(5) Vermont is home to many public schools, academies, and colleges that are world-class training grounds for skiing and snowboarding.

(6) In 1982, the Suicide Six Resort in Pomfret was the first resort in the United States to allow snowboarding.

(7) In the 1980s, Vermont was the first state in the country to host what is now known as a snowboard park at the Sonnenberg Ski Area in Barnard.

(8) The U.S. Open for Snowboarding is held in Vermont. This event is the renowned first competition for snowboarding and offers an exciting opportunity to watch the world's best snowboarders exhibiting their skills.

(9) At the 2002 Winter Olympics, Ross Powers of Stratton and Kelly Clark of Dover won the men's and women's gold medal respectively in the snowboarding halfpipe event.

(10) The United States Olympic Committee named Hannah Teeter of Belmont, the 2006 Winter Olympics women's halfpipe gold medalist, as the 2006 Sportswoman of the Year, the top honor that the committee confers. She returned to the Winter Olympics in 2010 to win a silver medal in the women's halfpipe while Kelly Clark followed immediately behind her in the competition, capturing the bronze medal.

(11) The United States Olympic Committee named former United States Halfpipe Head Coach Bud Keene of Stowe the 2006 National Coach of the Year.

(12) In 1977, Vermonter Jake Burton Carpenter founded a snowboard company in his barn and perfected the technology to build snowboards. Today, this Burlington-based company is the

worldwide leader in the manufacture and sale of snowboards. Jake and Donna Burton Carpenter were inducted into the United States National Ski and Snowboarding Hall of Fame in 2007.

(13) Increasingly, there is an alarmingly high number of obese children in the United States. Both skiing and snowboarding promote healthy outdoor exercise for children, their parents, and people of all ages.

(14) Vermont historically ranks as the third largest ski and snowboard state, with over four million snowboarder and skier visits per year, and both sports are a critical part of our state's economy, heritage, and way of life.

(15) Designating skiing and snowboarding as the Vermont state sports will encourage individuals to travel to Vermont to ski and snowboard where they will patronize local hotels and restaurants and purchase Vermont goods and services.

This bill also passed unanimously on a voice vote. In this relatively snowless winter, the bill will help draw some attention to Vermont winter sports. This weekend's snow in parts of Vermont offer some promise for a good late season for this important economic sector.

H. 559 An act relating to health care reform implementation

This year's health care bill started in the House. It was fully debated this week and will now go to the Senate. The final vote on the bill was 88 to 38 and I supported the bill and the committee's recommendation on the amendments which were accepted or rejected by about the same amount. Here is a short piece on the bill from the Vice-Chair of the committee, Rep. Copeland Hanzas.

“Vermont is planning for the implementation of the health care exchange by 2014 that is called for in the Affordable Care Act. Every state is setting up an exchange unless they prefer to let the federal government set one up for them. The exchange will make health coverage more affordable to middle class Vermonters by allowing them to access new federal tax credits and subsidies. The exchange will allow consumers to compare insurance products with a transparent, standardized web portal or with the help of trained navigators who can help Vermonters enroll. Working Vermonters will have a new freedom to choose a benefit plan that best meets their needs. Small businesses will be freed from the burden of administrating health benefits so they can focus on doing what they do best: growing business.

Two-thirds of Vermonters may qualify for tax credits in the exchange. That means households making less than \$92,200 (for a family of 4) will be eligible for help paying for their premium. Additionally, there will be greater support for households making \$52,625 or less.

Small Vermont businesses spend more than \$100 million toward their employees' health care today. Much of this can be freed up in 2014 for reinvestment in their business in the form of expansion, salary increases or business growth.

The exchange will offer a full range of health plans that are modeled on the most popular health plans in Vermont in 2012. We expect there to be at least 10 different plans, ranging from high deductible plans to robust platinum coverage.

The work of the House this year advanced cost containment projects, including payment reform and continued emphasis on prevention and management of illness through healthy life style choices. Employers will have 100% choice over their health care costs.

Working Vermonters will have portability when they purchase insurance in the exchange. Insurance coverage will be continuous whether you change jobs, reduce hours to stay home with a newborn or to start your own business. With premium assistance available through the exchange, it will be easier for Vermonters to maintain coverage during these big life changes.”

An important part of the bill, Section 31, disallowed discretionary clauses in insurance products. Many states have done this at great savings to citizens. These clauses basically give the insurer the absolute right to interpret an insurance contract as they see fit. Putting an end to discretionary clauses is basic consumer protection. A vote on this part of the bill was unanimous.

H. 556 An act relating to creating a private activity bond advisory committee

This bill came from my Commerce and Economic Development Committee. Last summer, the Governor, in response to a directive last year in the Jobs Bill to study and report to the legislature on how private activity bonds are allocated, created by Executive Order a private activity bond advisory committee. While the committee is a good idea as a better way to fairly allocate the bonds which are important to economic development, I felt that the legislature should authorize the committee as it will be allocating a public asset. The committee modified the Governor’s proposal as to appointments and timing and improved the language. We also added a section that authorizes a modest increase in Vermont Development Authority (VEDA) bonding. Last fall VEDA used up almost all its authorized lending to help businesses recover from Tropical Storm Irene. At the same time we decreased VEDA’s mortgage insurance authorization as it wasn’t being used. In this way we expect to continue to protect Vermont’s Triple AAA bond rating. This bill passed the House unanimously.

In February, the Joint Fiscal Office issued its *2012 Fiscal Facts* report. Here’s the link: <http://www.leg.state.vt.us/jfo/publications/2012%20Fiscal%20Facts.pdf>

The report covers many aspects of Vermont’s financial situation and is a good look at our fiscal health. It includes sections on revenues, debt, expenditures and comparisons to other states. Please let me know if you have any questions on the report or any other matter.

Here's what looks like an interesting community event related to Tropical Storm Irene recovery.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

“Coming Together in the Aftermath of Irene—Free Film Showing

Bennington, Vermont – February 18, 2012 – “Strength of the Storm” is a film that chronicles the aftermath of Tropical Storm Irene at the Weston mobile home park in Berlin, VT.

Once Irene passed, residents found that 70 of the 83 homes in the mobile park were damaged beyond repair. They were initially told that they had to cover the costs of the removal of their homes themselves, with little to no support from local elected officials--something they were incapable of doing. The film follows the evolution of the community reaction as Weston residents organized and eventually ensured that a fund was created to cover the cost of the removal of damaged mobile homes across the state.

The film, made by Rob Koier, will be shown in the Green Mountain Film Festival, but you can catch a free local showing at 7:30pm on March 8, at the Parish Hall of St. Peters Episcopal church in Bennington (corner of School and Pleasant Streets). The film is about an hour and is free to the public. There will also be free popcorn and drinks.”

As always, here's wishing you a good and healthy week.

Stay in touch,

Bill

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