

January 20, 2013

Hello All,

We are back to work at our normal legislative schedule. At this point in the session we spend most of our time in committee receiving updates from agencies, departments and various interest groups. Each committee has an area of jurisdiction where it concentrates its work. I rely on colleagues on other committees to keep me up to date on what is under consideration in their rooms. Here are a few brief reports from some other committees that I've edited.

Appropriations

House Appropriations considers all matters requiring expenditure of state dollars

"The first bill we work on in our committee is called Budget Adjustment (BAA for short). This is essentially mid-year corrections to the Appropriations Act (known as the Big Bill) that was passed last May for fiscal year 2013. FY13 began last July 1, 2013, and will govern all State expenditure through June 30, 2014, regardless of revenue source. The State has many Funds that receive revenues. The three main funds are the General Fund, the Education Fund and the Transportation Fund. Budget Adjustment is mostly about changes in the \$1.3 Billion General Fund. The Budget Adjustment bill and the Big Bill are prepared by the Governor's staff and submitted to the Legislature for its consideration. We in our committee take testimony from all of the Departments and Agencies regarding their requests for changes. We began this work the week before the new Biennium began. For a summary of changes see: http://www.leg.state.vt.us/jfo/appropriations/fy_2013/JFO%20Summary%20of%20GF%20Changes%20in%20BAA.pdf

While the net change in this BAA is essentially neutral, there are several trends upward that are most troubling for future budgets, largely in the human services arena, but also in Judiciary. For those who wish to investigate more thoroughly, here is a link to the JFO web site showing the whole BAA as submitted. http://www.leg.state.vt.us/jfo/budget_fy2013.aspx . Each committee will be asked to review the budget requests in their area of jurisdiction."-Rep. Manwaring

General, Housing & Military Affairs

(House GHMA considers matters related to alcoholic beverages, housing, claims against the state, labor relations, military matters including those relating to civil defense and discharged veterans, their dependents and survivors, and all matters relating to subjects for which there is no other appropriate committee.)

"The committee began the new session by focusing on homelessness. Service providers and state officials spoke to high needs throughout the state, especially in northwestern Vermont. Homeless shelters are at capacity and affordable housing options are scarce. More people are being placed in motels. The committee worked with the Appropriations Committee on a request for \$2.2 million for motel placements for the rest of FY13. The committee is concerned about the high cost and with safety and habitability problems at motels.

The committee met with representatives of Vermont's housing network. Affordable and structurally sound alternatives to older mobile homes are being designed and new mobile home park coop ownership structures are being actively explored. State Treasurer Beth Pearce is especially interested in new ways to finance housing development and Efficiency Vermont is advancing energy efficiency initiatives.

Gen. Tom Drew, the interim Adjutant General of the Vermont National Guard, spoke about the state of the Guard. Current enrollment is 2,820 members of the Army National Guard and 1,094 members of the Air National Guard. Members are staying on longer with full enrollment expected in 2013. Expansion of the Vermont Office of Veterans Affairs' service officer program is needed to support claims for federal Veterans Administration claims. The committee also heard from representatives of the American Legion, VFW, Vietnam Veterans Association, and other veteran's service organizations about their programs and legislative agendas."-Rep. Vowinkel

Judiciary

(House Judiciary considers matters related to judicial and legal affairs)

"The committee took testimony on Forfeiture and Restitution of Public Employee Pensions. The administration has brought forward a bill on the forfeiture of public employee pensions when the public employee has been convicted of a crime. The bill applies to all public employees and was developed in consultation with organizations employing public employees. The proposal changes the ground rules on public employee pensions. Under current state law there isn't any authority for a court to order forfeiture or restitution and there is no recourse for taxpayers. The administration stressed this is public trust issue.

The Judiciary Committee also took testimony from the Chief Justice and from staff in the court administrator's office on the Judiciary branch's two million dollar Budget Adjustment Act request. The committee understands the Judiciary Budget Adjustment Act request is based on a deficit that was created due in part to unrealized vacancy savings resulting from Judicial Restructuring.

The Judiciary Committee also discussed the \$500,000 savings the Judiciary plans to realize through operating cuts, including the elimination of the small claims mediation program and reducing judicial college training days."-Rep. Grad

Government Operations

(House Gov Ops considers matters relating to organization, oversight and conduct of state government, compensation of state officials and employees, pensions, law enforcement, public safety, reapportionment, municipal corporations, suffrage, nominations, elections and the election of members; local, county, and regional governmental structures; relations between state and local governments)

"The Government Operations committee has broad oversight of state government, covering topics ranging from election law to retirement benefits for state employees.

The committee received the 2013 report of the Public Records study committee. The state has 200- plus exemptions for public record requests sprinkled throughout the law and the committee wants to

examine how exemptions become law. The committee does not currently review every proposed exemption however it hopes that every time legislation adds an exemption to the public record statute, the proposal will pass through our committee.

Gove Ops will also review the report from the summer study committee on search and rescue protocol. The recommendations state that there should be greater collaboration among public safety officials in search and rescue, however the state police should oversee the process.”-Rep. Evans

Health Care

(The House Health Care Committee considers matters relating to health care finance and administration)

“The Committee is focused on the rollout of health care reform efforts. Vermont has been a leader in health care innovation and will not be creating any new major reform. The committee will focus on implementation, higher quality, more rational cost and greater access for Vermonters.

In particular, the committee will work to ensure successful start up of Vermont Health Connect, Vermont’s health care exchange under the federal affordable care act. We will be giving close attention to education and outreach efforts to enroll people in Vermont Health Connect. The committee understands that Vermonters will be faced with many new choices in insurance through Vermont Health Connect as we lead up to the Oct 1, 2013 enrollment period and that the outreach and support given to small business owners will not look the same as outreach to a family.

The committee also plans to continue to focus on payment reform and cost containment efforts. We know that at current rates of growth, no health care system is sustainable. We are following the work being done at the Green Mountain Care Board, DVHA and the Department of Health to save health care dollars by transforming our health care delivery system so that it is concerned with improving quality and keeping people healthy.

The committee will give careful consideration to the cost of health insurance for Vermonters on VHAP and Catamount Assistance who will move to Vermont Health Connect (the exchange). This population includes working Vermonters who used to be eligible for some of Vermont's health care coverage who will need to move to a private insurance product with federal tax credits and/or premium subsidies. The federal benefits will leave many of people with higher out of pocket costs in health care. We will consider the governor's proposal to help Vermonters facing huge sticker shock in Vermont Health Connect. Financing Vermont Health Connect (the exchange) will be presented with the Governor's budget address on January 24th.”-Rep. Copeland-Hanzas

Education

(The House Education Committee considers matters pertaining to arts, libraries, literary and scientific subjects and education)

“The focus of Governor Shumlin’s inaugural address on education generated an enthusiastic response from Vermont’s education leaders. Calling education the State’s “greatest economic development tool,” the Governor said his plan is about growing jobs and making sure the state has a skilled workforce to fill them. A day after the inaugural address, at a press conference the Vermont Superintendents Association

and Vermont School Board Association held to announce their five-point agenda for overhauling our education system, the organization's leaders noted that many of the priorities the Governor articulated are aligned with their key goals. Their plan includes providing pre-kindergarten to all students, engaging parents more in their children's education, attracting committed, creative teachers, changing the teacher preparation and licensure system to better meet the needs of contemporary education, and ensuring all students have access to modern technology. In his testimony before the House Education Committee this week, the State Board of Education (SBE) Chair said the board saw a lot of commonality between their priorities and the Governor's. He added that he has been very encouraged so far on how well the newly configured relationship between the SBE and the recently appointed Secretary of Education is working. The school board chairs that testified before the Education Committee highlighted signs of hope we are on the way to a brighter education future. One chair noted that during her two decades of service it was the first time she recalled leaders from every sector of education sitting down together and defining how Vermont is going to deliver a world class education system. Another said he was heartened by the fact that educational leaders are no longer arguing about the agenda we need to pursue in order to provide Vermonters with a world-class education and agree that everyone has to work together to achieve the goal."-Rep. Stuart

Human Services

(House Human Services Committee considers matters relating to human services, public health and social and economic security)

"The Human Services Committee oversees the work of the Agency of Human Services, mostly in the Department for Children and Families (DCF), the Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living (DAIL), and the Department of Mental Health (DMH). These departments deal with issues relating to children, people with low incomes, people who are elderly, people with disabilities, and people needing mental health care.

The Committee started the session by taking testimony on issues in several areas of the Agency of Human Services Budget Adjustment requests. We supported most of the Administration's proposals. One of the upward pressures is in the Department for Children and Families (DCF). An initiative called STARS (STep Ahead Recognition System) to promote high quality in child care programs has been very successful. This means it is costing more than anticipated because so many centers are participating. The committee supported increasing this investment thinking it will pay valuable dividends in the long run.

We are beginning to learn about the child care portion of the Governor's Initiative on Education. We heard from Doug Racine, Secretary of the Agency of Human Services, that 72% of Vermont children under the age of six have both parents in the workforce, a fact that makes access to high quality childcare critically important. We will be looking at all of the investments that the State makes to assist children in getting the best possible start in life and to move families out of poverty."-Rep. Evans

Institutions and Corrections

(The House Institutions and Corrections Committee considers matters relating to the Department of Corrections and public buildings, state lands and property)

“A major responsibility for this committee is state owned buildings including the entire Waterbury complex as well as the state hospital. Both were destroyed in Tropical Storm Irene in August 2011. The committee heard from the Commissioner of Buildings and General Services, Michael Obuchowski on the progress the State has made with plans for rebuilding the state hospital and renovating and rebuilding the Waterbury Complex. Financial updates will follow the Governor’s budget address and when we receive the Capital Budget.

On Tuesday, January 9th, the committee participated in the groundbreaking ceremony for the new State Hospital in Berlin. Although the Governor was not specific or detailed, he said he was pleased with the information he has received from our insurance carriers and FEMA on the amount of reimbursement and payment we should receive. The Administration appears to have worked diligently to leave no stone unturned looking for funds to assist in all areas of Irene recovery.”-*Rep. Lenex*

I have heard from several constituents on a number of the issues and summer study committee proposals that have been in the news recently. These are on a heating oil tax, transportation infrastructure funding and gun control. I greatly appreciate hearing from you on these issues as they all cut close to our rural communities. The proposal on heating oil is one of many in a report on thermal efficiency that was delivered to the legislature last week. Here’s a link to the report: <http://www.leg.state.vt.us/reports/2013ExternalReports/285697.pdf> . The tax we have heard about in the media is one of several financing options from one of the subcommittees that worked on the report. I recommend taking a look and considering the information in its entirety. This report will be discussed first in the Natural Resource Committees.

The transportation funding report also came to the legislature recently. Here it is: <http://www.aot.state.vt.us/Documents/Sec%2040%20Funding%20Study%20-%20Final%20Legislative%20Report%20Jan%208%202013.pdf> . The report summary at the end will give you the best overall idea of the thinking of the group. I have heard most about one idea in the report and that is considering vehicle miles travelled **instead of** the gas tax for a funding source. Here’s part of the group’s conclusion on that concept, “There are numerous challenges to implementing aVMT tax and it is not feasible for Vermont to establish this type of system on its own in the near term.” This report is also worth reading. It will likely be discussed first in the Transportation Committees.

Violence with firearms issues have been very much on everybody’s mind since the recent horrible and unacceptable events in Newtown Connecticut and Webster NY. I have heard from many of you on this issue. Thank you. I support responsible gun ownership. In the legislature one bill on the subject, S.32, has been introduced in the Senate and it will be sent to the Senate Judiciary Committee. The committee is chaired by Sen. Dick Sears. Here is his position on the bill as he wrote to a Pownal constituent of ours. “Thank you for your thoughts on S.32. As you may know I do not support the bill introduced by Senator Baruth and its chances of passage are, in my opinion very slim. However, I do plan to hold a public hearing, on Feb. 7 from 6:30 to 8:30 that will allow the public to voice opinions both on S.32 as well as other proposals. Those proposals include forming a task force that would look in to violence in our communities and should there be a state law that bars certain felons from owning fire arms and the guns for drugs trade. From my perspective, Vermont's real "gun problem" and I hate that term; are guns being traded for drugs. I hope to be able to continue to spotlight that issue and find ways to deal with it without infringing on others rights.”

Next week: The main events next week are floor debate on the Budget Adjustment Act, The Governor's budget address on Thursday afternoon, and a joint hearing my committee will hold with the Transportation and Judiciary Committees. Here's the hearing announcement: [Gasoline Pricing](#): The Chairs of the House Commerce, Transportation, and Judiciary Committees have scheduled a joint meeting to be held Tuesday, January 22, from 2:30 to 4:30 p.m. in Room 11 of the Statehouse, for the purpose of hearing testimony on gas pricing throughout the state. The committees hope to understand what the law is regarding pricing, what other states do and if there are tools available to Vermont to address the issue. Following the meeting, the committees will hold a public hearing from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m. at Colchester High School on the same subject. Members of the public interested in testifying about gas pricing in the state may sign up starting 30 minutes prior to the meeting.

I hope everybody enjoys a good Martin Luther King holiday and a healthy week.

Stay in touch,

Bill

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