

February 16, 2014

Hello all,

With the big snow throughout Vermont last week, we are certainly in the heart of winter. I hear temperatures are expected to moderate next week and while there is much more winter to come, the days will lengthen rapidly with the change of seasons soon to follow.

Here's some community information:

Free Soccer Clinic Event: Feb 23, 2014, 11:30 AM to 1:30 PM

A message from Boy Scout David Hojnowski:

All current Pownal Elementary Students, grades K-6, are invited to a mini soccer clinic! Hope you can join us – it's guaranteed to be fun, and no soccer experience required. Here are the details:

When: Sunday, February 23rd - 11:30 am to 1:30 pm

Where: Bennington Sports Center, 230 School Street, Bennington (the former Catamount Elementary School)

Cost: Free! (water will be provided for all.)

IMPORTANT – you need to pre-register!

To pre-register, you can either email me at hojo777@comcast.net or you can call me 823-5929. I just need to know the Name, Age and Grade of the student attending.

(I am hosting this mini soccer clinic as part of my Eagle Service Project, along with the construction of soccer goals for Pownal Elementary.)

Thanks, and hope to see you there!

David Hojnowski

Also if you would like to donate to David's soccer goal project here's how.

The link to the online page that David has set up at GoFundMe is:

www.gofundme.com/5p4euw .

If anyone would like to make donation by check, it can be made payable to **Boy Scout Troop 353** and mailed to:

David Hojnowsk

1094 Hidden Valley Road

Pownal, VT 05261

(802) 823-5929

hojo777@comcast.net

David writes that any money donated beyond the amount required would be given to the Pownal Elementary School.

When I last looked at the website I saw that David has raised about 75% of his goal—only a few hundred more dollars to go!

I also noted over the weekend in the Banner that many students from our towns are doing well in school. As a UVM Trustee I was especially glad to see that Carson Casey and Kathryn Warrender made the UVM Dean's list.

School and Town Reports This is the time of year school and town annual reports come out in preparation for the town and school business meetings on March 3 and voting on March 4.

Pownal's school meeting is March 3 at 7pm, the town meeting at 7:30 at the Pownal Elementary School with voting on March 4 from 7am to 7pm at the Pownal Center Firehouse.

Woodford's school and town meeting is March 3 at 7:30pm at the Woodford Town Building with balloting on March 4 from 8am to 7pm at the Woodford Town Building

The school reports are available at the SVSU Administrative Office, the schools and the Town Offices.

You can also see the school reports online at www.svsu.org

Vermont State Tax Forms I have heard that people have been having a hard time finding Vermont State Tax Forms. I have asked the Tax Department for some and have put them at the Pownal Solomon Wright Library, the Pownal Town Office and American Legion.

I have learned that the Tax Department is limiting requests to 5 paper booklets per customer and they will send them directly to you. The Tax Department writes “paper copies of the booklet and forms may be ordered by emailing taxforms@state.vt.us or by calling the toll-free number (855) 297-5600.

The request should include full name, mailing address, form numbers and quantity of forms needed.

Here’s a link to the Tax Department’s new policy on distributing forms which they are no longer sending automatically to post offices, libraries and town offices.

http://www.state.vt.us/tax/pdf.word.excel/misc/Press%20Release_%20Distribution%20of%20VT%20Tax%20Booklet%20&%20Forms.pdf

Forms and instructions can also be downloaded and printed from the following website:

<http://www.state.vt.us/tax/forms.shtml>

Here are this week’s bills that passed the House.

H. 739 An act relating to rulemaking by the Judicial Nominating Board

This bill makes it clear that the application candidates use in the Judicial Nominating Process would be designed by the Judicial Nominating Process and not through the more cumbersome rule making process.

H. 612 An act relating to Gas Pipeline Safety Program penalties

My Commerce Committee recommended this bill which brings our penalties into line with federal standards. By doing so Vermont becomes eligible for federal resources for its inspection and safety programs. We also added the following language to the original bill to make sure that Vermont’s safety standards are up to date.

GAS PIPELINE SAFETY RULES; BEST PRACTICES

For the purpose of implementing optimum natural gas pipeline safety rules, the Public Service Board shall review and consider amending Board Rule 6.100 (Enforcement of Safety Regulations Pertaining to Intrastate Gas Pipelines and Transportation Facilities) to include any additional measures or best practices that may exceed the minimum federal safety standards, provided the Board determines such measures or practices are appropriate for Vermont.

With the proposed expansion of the Vermont Gas line south from Burlington, now is the time to examine pipeline safety rules.

H. 655 An act relating to fiscal year 2014 budget adjustments

The budget adjustment act came back from the Senate with proposed changes that the House Appropriations Committee recommended we accept. After discussion we did so on a voice vote. One addition I noted was funding and establishing a process for looking at the use of paraprofessionals in schools. Here's what would be examined:

- (1) the relationship between the use of paraprofessionals and achievement of identified student outcomes;
- (2) factors that influence a school district's decision to use paraprofessionals to deliver special education services;
- (3) the range of and impacts resulting from the implementation of school wide programs for improving and managing behaviors, particularly on the use of paraprofessionals;
- (4) if and how the current education funding system impacts the use of paraprofessionals to deliver special education services;
- (5) the quality and availability of information to boards and administrators of supervisory unions and school districts to monitor and evaluate the delivery of special education services; and
- (6) local governance practices regarding regular reevaluation of the needs for one-on-one aides and the movement of special needs students toward independence from an aide

In carrying out this work we asked that the report would "Interview school board members, administrators, licensed teachers, and paraprofessionals and shall provide opportunities for participation by students with special needs and their parents or guardians."

H. 809 An act relating to designation of new town centers and growth centers

Vermont administers five programs designed to focus growth and development in our downtowns. The five programs are: (1) designated downtowns, (2) designated village centers, (3) neighborhood development areas, (4) new town centers, and (5) growth centers. Last year the Legislature approved housekeeping and technical changes to the programs for designated downtowns, designated villages and neighborhood development areas. This year H.809 which passed the House this week on a voice vote makes similar housekeeping and technical changes to "new town centers" and "growth centers." Although mostly a re-organization of existing law, the bill makes a few technical changes designed to:

- Integrate the town and regional plans with the designation programs,
- Encourage the location of growth centers within designated downtowns and villages,
- Facilitate pre-application meetings between the applicant and the Department of Housing and Community Development,
- Explicitly recognize form-based design codes,
- Minimize impacts to natural resources and flood hazard areas.

The Natural Resources Committee expects now to work on H.823, a bill that would provide incentives through Act 250 for development in designated downtowns, villages and growth centers.

H. 62 An act relating to prohibiting the handheld use of a portable electronic device while driving

The longest debate of the week was on this bill. The bill ultimately passed 130 to 11 after a number of clarifying amendments were added. I voted yes. I expect more changes will be added in the Senate as people look at who is captured in the bill. I have already heard from ham radio operators who are often critical in emergency situations. It is important to note that the bill covers only hand held devices when a vehicle is moving. For years a very strong majority of Vermonters have supported this change. It has usually been supported by one of the largest majorities in the annual Dole poll in Pownal and Woodford. The Judiciary and Transportation committees heard compelling statistics on the impacts of this form of distracted driving and after many years of holding off decided it is time to go forward. Also technology has advanced to the point where hands free devices are much more accessible.

H. 640 An act relating to technical corrections

This Government Operations bill, though long, makes technical changes to current statute in a number of areas—none controversial. Amendments to the bill became controversial though when the Secretary of State noted that a technical fix was required to another bill we recently passed on campaign finance. Not making that fix would mean that no campaign limits would be in place for the coming election cycle.

A number of amendments were offered to the bill that would have completely changed the campaign finance bill we passed but they were either ruled non-germane or defeated. One amendment received 13 votes for and 122 against and I voted no. That amendment would have left Vermont with no campaign limits at all. Though the current limits are higher than what I

would like to see, this is a case where I'm willing to support what came through the process at this time.

Here are some reports and information on what other House Committees are working on.
In this Montpelier Notes my concentration is on education and education funding.

EDUCATION, by Rep. Valerie Stewart

There appears to be a convergence of opinion across a broadly based cross section of leaders from the worlds of education, the legislature, the executive branch of government and the general public that Vermont's public education system must change in order to provide our state's students with the 21st century skills necessary to succeed in today's global economy.

This long list of leaders from every part of our state includes the Governor and the new Secretary of Education, the heads of the House and Senate, superintendents, school boards, parents, employers and students.

The fact that this past January the Governor and Legislative leaders invited lawmakers to a two-day conference at the University of Vermont on Education Finance and Innovation attests to the fact that the Green Mountain State's leaders are eager to tackle the challenge of fixing the most fundamentally flawed aspects of our educational system.

The chorus calling for Vermont's 19th century education delivery system to change on many key points:

- * Our current education system is based on an agricultural and industrial model that is now ill equipped to prepare students for success in the 21st century workplace.
- * Our current system is clearly unable to address the fact that Vermont's enrollment rates are declining while costs continue to rise.

Despite the fact that Vermont has one of the highest per pupil average expenditures (approximately \$17,500 per student) in the nation, towns and school boards continue to vote for higher spending on education.

- * Our state's education costs continue to increase at an unsustainable rate in spite of the fact that student enrollments continue to decline.
- * The revolving door of leaders, such as superintendents and principals make it extremely difficult for our state to make widespread progress achieving critical goals such as:

- Addressing the achievement gap, which is a key cost driver within the system as the ranks of poor in American and Vermont continue to swell and the breakdown of the American family, which makes it necessary for schools to provide many of the necessities families used to provide (food, clothing, a supportive home environment and, in some cases, even a roof over a child's head).
- High turnover among superintendents and principals from every corner of the state is creating so much “churn” within the system that it is practically impossible to provide the kind of ongoing and consistent leadership that is essential for Vermont’s students to make real progress.
- Our state is still not making enough progress in terms of identifying and addressing the needs of students whose academic performance is not at grade level.
- Our state’s high school graduation rate is one of the best in the nation, but our college entrance and completion rate is under par.
- The current funding system is creating special education “magnet centers” that fuel the burgeoning tax burdens of municipalities whose schools do an excellent job of addressing special needs students in an unsustainable manner.

Our current Career and Technical Education Center funding formula is flawed and inadvertently penalizes “sending” schools. It thereby unintentionally creates a disincentive for schools to send their students to such experiential learning centers. In the process, it deprives the “receiving” schools of students. This makes some programs’ enrollment numbers too low to be cost effective and/or viable. Research shows such programs inspire and prepare students for hands-on, skill driven jobs in the “real” world.

WAYS and MEANS, by Rep. Kesha Ram

W&M is hard at work exploring all facets of education financing. We have a limited number of levers we can pull for the current fiscal year to reduce the 7 cent increase on the homestead ratepayers, and we are evaluating the impacts of deploying those options. For FY15 and beyond, we are discussing a range of proposed modifications to Act 68, many of which were put on the table last session. Here is the list to date:

Short-and Longer-Term Options for Modification of Act 68

Impose a “soft” cap on education spending by limiting annual per-pupil growth in each school district to the rate of inflation (Rep. Komline’s proposal)

Modify the base tax rate on household income by –

- o Raising the base tax rate from 1.8% to 1.9% either permanently, as a floor, or for FY2015 only

- o Unlinking the base tax rate on household income from the base tax rate on homestead value (a current-law issue once the base homestead tax rate exceeds \$1.00)

Modify the high-spending threshold calculation –

- o By tying the threshold to inflation rather than the prior year's statewide average per-pupil spending

- o By lowering the high-spending threshold from 1.21%

Repeal or phase out the small schools grants except for those schools deemed small by geographical necessity

Modify the renter rebate program –

- o By lowering the percentage of rent deemed property tax from 21%

- o By repealing the program and redirecting existing EF funding to another program designed to assist low-income renters

Modify the homeowner rebate program –

- o By repealing the rebate for the education tax and

- o Adjusting the parameters of the rebate for a municipal property tax rebate only

Lower total personnel costs in schools by mandating –

- o Minimum teacher/pupil ratios

- o Minimum staff/pupil ratios

- o Minimum class size

Modify the property tax adjustment –

- o By extending the housesite value limit from \$200,000 to \$250,000

- o By repealing the \$15,000 exemption for taxpayers with household income under \$47,000

- o By repealing the property tax adjustment “lookback”

Modify the equalized pupil calculation –

- o By repealing or lowering the 3.5% hold-harmless provision

o By repealing the rapid growth provision

Modify the calculation of the spending-adjusted homestead property tax rates by setting a “yield” rather than a base tax rate and base education amount (note that this would require the elimination of the property tax adjustment “look-back”)

Mandate teacher contract provisions –

o By requiring all teachers to pay 20% of their health insurance costs

o By requiring teachers that have the ability to move to their spouse’s health insurance plan to do so

o By imposing a statewide teachers’ contract

Require school districts to contribute toward teachers’ retirement –

o By requiring school districts to contribute to teachers’ pension costs

o By requiring school districts to contribute to teachers’ retirement health care costs

Modify administration of the statewide education tax by –

o Eliminating the need for the common level of appraisal by providing for rolling 3- year reappraisals by property valuation & review

o Requiring the department of taxes to collect the statewide education tax (would allow for the use of the “yield” and elimination of the property tax adjustment “look-back”)

Require municipalities that do not operate their own K-12 systems to designate a school or schools for the students that they tuition to other school districts

Decide how to use the \$11.8M in the supplemental property tax relief fund

As you can see there are many factors that can be considered. The lists above represent to me a deep look at possibilities. The committees will continue their discussions before recommending changes.

I hope your coming week is a good one.

Stay in touch,

Bill

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