

2023 Town Meeting Report



We're halfway through the 2023 legislative session! We've passed some significant legislation in these first two months, and this report provides highlights. Work on our key priorities will continue, debating bills and considering key investments. It's an honor to serve as your state representative. Please reach out anytime with ideas, questions, and concerns.

BUILDING A BALANCED BUDGET FOR FY24

The House is working on the next Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 budget. The committee expects to present its proposed budget later this month. We are seeing substantial revenue growth this year, largely due to the impact of federal pandemic stimulus and recovery dollars. Our challenge is to make strategic use of one-time funds to meet state priorities such as leveraging federal dollars to support roads, bridges and infrastructure needs under Congress' Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act.. Other targeted investments will be in housing, broadband expansion, workforce training, clean energy and childcare.

UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS

During the pandemic, the federal government provided free school meals to all K-12 students. Last session, the legislature continued this offering. Universal school meals provides efficiency in planning and purchasing, less stigma and increased partnerships with local farms. Schools have reported elevated health and behavioral outcomes with expanded nutrition and food education. Strong access to federal dollars will greatly offset the State expense. To learn more, see [H.165](#).

ADDRESSING SCHOOL CONSTRUCTION NEEDS

The House Education committee is considering options to address the statewide backlog in school construction. A moratorium on school construction was implemented in 2007, and Vermont is now the only New England state without an active program of state assistance for school construction. A statewide assessment of school facilities is currently underway with a completion deadline of October 2023.

Given Vermont's small, mostly rural population, the RIDE (Rhode Island Department of Education) School Construction Program is likely the closest fit providing a minimum state match of 35%. Once projects are completed, districts are required to spend 3% of their budget annually on maintenance.

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, returnable bottles and cans produce more marketable and reusable materials than what gets tossed into our commingled recycling bins. [H.158](#) proposes an expansion of the decades-old deposit system to cover most beverages, including plastic water bottles and glass wine bottles. The bill requires that beverage manufacturers and distributors collaborate in a stewardship program to fund more redemption centers, provide fair compensation, and increase usage.

SUICIDE PREVENTION

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. 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 by mandating the safe storage of firearms in places where they might be accessed by children, by instituting a mandatory waiting period and extending 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 childcare profoundly impacts Vermont and its economy. [H. 208](#), develops a blueprint to create full-time pre-K for all 4-year-olds in Vermont, increase compensation educators and financially support community and home-based child care programs by reimbursing centers for enrollment while also elevating and streamlining oversight.

PROTECTING HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS AND PATIENTS

[H.89](#)– also known as the Shield Bill – provides protections for patients and providers from prosecutions and investigations by states that have banned or restricted reproductive and gender-affirming care that is legal in Vermont. It also provides some protections for out-of-state patients receiving this care from Vermont providers.

EDUCATION FUNDING & PROPERTY APPRAISALS

It's fair to say the rise in property values has been historic. The Committee on Ways & Means has spent the first few months looking at a wide range of solutions such as moving away from funding education with property taxes and moving to a consistent statewide system for property appraisals. The goal is to avoid large changes in values that catch property owners by surprise, and to relieve pressure on municipalities to manage appraisals with limited resources. The committee is also looking at ways to recategorize non-homestead property values.

EDUCATION – PUBLIC VS PRIVATE EDUCATION

Many of you have already reached out about the US Supreme Court decisions in Carson v. Makin. The courts decided that states like Vermont do not have to pay any tuition dollars to any private schools, but, if they do, they cannot treat religious schools any differently than they treat public schools. Some of these schools are challenging state mandates surrounding anti-discrimination saying they burden their religious expression. The House Education committee is working on a bill to increase transparency and oversight to all types of independent schools that receive public dollars.

RESOURCES

- <https://www.eanvt.org/affordable-heat-faq/>
- Efficiency Vermont page on available incentives: <https://www.encyvermont.com/rebates>
- Drive Electric Vermont page on vehicle incentives (obviously not covered by the bill, but since it came up I wanted to share this page as well): <https://www.driveelectricvt.com/incentives>
- Summary of the Weatherization Ratepayer Assistance Program (the on-bill financing pilot program I mentioned): <https://www.driveelectricvt.com/incentives>
- Rewiring America's IRA incentives calculator (note that while the tax credits became available starting on Jan 1 of this year, the low and moderate income rebates that will be offered through the states are taking longer to stand up, and should be available in Vermont late this year or early next year): <https://www.rewiringamerica.org/app/ira-calculator>
- Summary of the climate investments in last year's budget, including those for electrical upgrades and heat pump water heaters, which are still in the process of being stood up: <https://www.vpirg.org/victories/climate-investments-fy-23/>
- [Fuel assistance](#), and [Energy Assistance](#) (for low income VGS and GMP customers) programs

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