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Session Successes

The off-beat end of the 2019 legislative session has grabbed a lot of attention (see my earlier column, "Perspective on the End of Session," June 7). But the more important news is the great progress made on many fronts — most of it with bi- and tri-partisan support.

My committee, Energy and Technology, crafted a broadband bill (H.513) to empower local communities to plan and build high-speed internet service.

The bill funds feasibility studies and business plans; provides start-up financing for the first phase of build-out; and creates a technical assistance specialist position in the Dept. of Public Service to assist and guide communities. (I am working with a local committee to make use of these provisions for St. Johnsbury, Lyndonville and surrounding towns.)

H.513 also directs the Health Dept. to study possible health consequences of exposure to 5G radio emissions, and creates a study committee to assess how changes in federal policy will affect local public-access television. The bill passed the House 139-2 and the Senate 29-0.

A workforce training bill, H.533, increases funding for training, career and technical education, and certification, particularly in health care, child care, and weatherization. This bill also continues incentives for new workers to relocate to Vermont; and continues funding for efforts to streamline requirements for small businesses, including a "one-stop" web portal. The bill passed the Senate 24-3 and the House on unanimous voice vote.

House and Senate Appropriations committees, led by local sisters Representative Kitty Toll and Senator Jane Kitchel, crafted a balanced budget, as they always do. It passed the Senate 24-3 and the House on unanimous voice vote.

The budget increases investments in several important areas that have not had increases in many years: child care; Parent-Child Centers; mental health services; Reach-Up Program; state colleges; Weatherization Program; and a variety of forest, agriculture, and recreation programs.

The budget invests a substantial portion of unanticipated one-time revenues in reducing debt from past pension fund deficits, and fully funds current obligations. It also makes necessary contributions to the rainy-day fund.

On water quality, Vermont is finally meeting federal EPA requirements that we identify an ongoing funding source for the state's portion of costs to clean up our lakes and rivers, including the Connecticut River. That funding source is 6% of the rooms and meals tax. The bill (S.96) passed the Senate on voice vote and the House 133-5.

On vehicle inspections, the legislature responded to citizens' concerns about emissions systems triggering the "check engine" light and causing the vehicle to fail inspection. Vehicles up to 10 years old are covered by manufacturer's warranty and must be repaired. Vehicles 10 to 16 years old, that are worth at least \$5,000, and that would pass inspection with emissions systems repaired, are eligible for up to \$2,500 voucher to pay for those repairs — if the owner

is eligible for fuel assistance. This bill (H.529) also authorizes a study to assess the viability of training Americorps volunteers to make these repairs at voc-tech centers.

H.529 also provides incentives to help lower-income folks purchase used high-MPG cars, whether gas-only, hybrid, or plug-in hybrid. The bill makes important advances in developing the electric-vehicle charging network. And of particular interest to area residents, the bill authorizes reconstruction of the Park and Ride lot in St. Johnsbury by July 2020. H.529 passed the Senate 30-0 and the House on near-unanimous voice vote.

The foregoing laundry list is just some highlights of the work accomplished this session, again generally with the support of all parties, both chambers, and the administration. But of course there is much left to do.

Completing work on minimum wage and paid family and medical leave is one thing, of course. For another, I and several legislators are working this summer and fall to improve the quality and efficiency of buildings.

Because of my experience managing energy efficiency and housing programs, I was approached during the session by the Home Builders Association to work on raising adherence to energy standards. They are concerned that their members abide by the standards but must compete with builders who either don't understand them or chose to ignore them.

The Home Builders join many others who would like to see enforcement of energy standards, building science training for builders, and certification of builder competence to protect consumers. The legislative working group during the off-session will convene stakeholders and draft ideas for legislation to address these and related strategies.

My first legislative session was an extraordinary experience. I thank the voters of St. Johnsbury for placing their faith in me and allowing me the honor to serve. I worked hard, learned a great deal, and understand there is much more to learn. The 2019 session may be over, but the work and the learning continues.

Please contact me with any questions or concerns at scampbell@leg.state.vt.us, and keep an eye on Front Porch Forum for upcoming events.