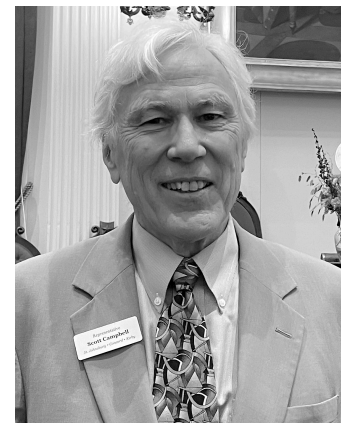


Representative Scott Campbell
 St. Johnsbury, Concord, Kirby
Legislative Report
Town Meeting
March 2023



REP. CAMPBELL

"Freedom and Unity"

How It All Works

Quick civics refresher. The Legislature takes an (unpaid) break Town Meeting week. We're 9 weeks into a scheduled 18-week session.

By the end of the week following break, bills must be passed out of all committees except Appropriations in order to "cross over" to the other body.

Then bills must pass committees and floor votes in the other body. Differences between the two versions, if any, must be worked out after that.

So as of Town Meeting break, nothing is final. But much is in process — a long process!

Leading Statewide Issues

Here are a few big issues being worked on.

- Childcare funding
- Paid Family & Medical Leave Insurance
- Universal school meals
- Workforce development
- Affordable Heat Act
- Housing development

Childcare Funding

Act 45* of 2021 set a goal of improving public support and limiting a family's cost of childcare to 10% of their income. The resulting July 2022 report estimated an annual funding gap of \$258 million ([presentation](#), [full report](#)).

The need for childcare is obvious, especially for single-parents but also for two-parent families since in most cases both must work.

We long ago recognized the need for universal basic education. I believe the day will come when we place the same value, and funding, on childcare.

The Legislature is wrestling with the issue now ([VTDigger, 2/1/23](#)).

Paid Family & Medical Leave Insurance

Pandemic emergency funding cushioned the loss of income for those suffering from or caring for family members with covid. It also revealed in sharp relief a vital support for working families.

Gov. Scott has proposed a voluntary system provided by employers. In my view, this is utterly inadequate. In the late 1940s, the U.S. declined to establish universal medical insurance like other industrial democracies, and instead opted for an employer-based system. That choice gave us the

highest-costs and middling-results compared to our peers. And, medical debt is a leading cause of personal bankruptcy. No one, except medical insurers, would choose such a system now.

House Ways & Means committee is crafting H.66 that would establish a universal insurance system. At a cost of about 1% of salary or wages, employees would be eligible for full wage replacement, up to 100% of State average weekly wage. That would help especially lower-paid employees and smaller employers unable to provide such a benefit. Employees working for companies with an existing system as good or better would be exempt.

Universal School Meals

During the pandemic, the federal government provided for free school meals for all K-12 students. A state education fund surplus last year offered the opportunity to continue that program as a state-funded pilot, under S.100 (Act 151, 2022).

The results were great, which no one doubts. Kids benefit, especially those who most need to eat, staff benefits with more accurate planning and less hassle accounting for money, local farmers benefit by establishing a more stable market with schools.

H.165, in its current version now in House Ways & Means, would continue the program. If paid through property taxes, the nonpartisan Legislative Joint Fiscal Office estimates it would raise both homestead and non-homestead rates approximately \$0.03 (per \$100 valuation). Are the undeniable benefits worth that? These are the tough questions your representatives are wrestling with. (Recent article, [VTDigger, 1/25/23](#))

Workforce Development

Staffing shortages continue almost everywhere. Vermont's unemployment rate is 2.6% (Dec. 2022), lower than New England (3.4%) and the U.S. (3.5%). And our workforce still hasn't recovered to pre-pandemic levels (stats: nonfarm payroll ~302,000 Dec. 2022 vs 312,000-317,000 2015-19).

Everything is connected to workforce: housing, childcare, infrastructure and amenities, pay and benefits. Still, House Commerce & Community Development is working on specific strategies, such as improving training pipelines and incentives for nurses, teachers and the construction trades.

* Links to underlined text are on online version of this report at CampbellForVermont.com.

Affordable Heat Act

There is a truly unfortunate and disappointing amount of misinformation and outright falsehoods being spread about this bill. No, it is not about "punishing" rural and low- to moderate-income Vermonters. It is about helping these very folks with the high upfront cost to get off the fossil-fuel price rollercoaster.

Look, the problem is we can't rely on oil and gas to heat our homes forever. But the high cost of weatherization, pellet boilers and heat pumps keeps people captive to the global oil market and the next supply disruption or excuse to jack profits.

Market incentives today ensure continued dominance of oil, to the peril of us all, *especially* the most vulnerable. And the sellers of this product bear no responsibility for the harm it causes.

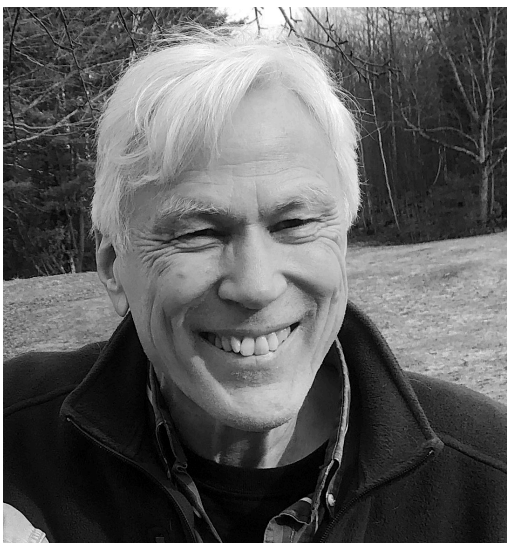
The Affordable Heat Act changes this dynamic by incentivizing fossil fuel importers to help retail customers reduce their exposure to price spikes. See [my commentary](#) in VT Digger for a further discussion of how it will work.

Friends, climate change is not some distant environmental inconvenience. It brings serious economic consequences for everyone. I believe the responsible path is dealing with it, not waiting for another study, or searching for a solution that won't cost anything. In fact, delay only increases costs.

Housing Development

The State has allocated some \$345 million in housing over the last several years. Innovative programs such as Vermont Housing Improvement Program, offering owners of vacant properties matching grants up to \$50,000 per unit to bring them back in service have proved effective.

Another part of the solution is addressing zoning and permitting issues that have the effect of limiting new projects and increasing their costs. House and Senate have various bills in the works. But streamlining the process and potentially restricting the scope of local zoning also have obvious drawbacks. I agree reform is needed, but will be watching closely what emerges.



WHAT I'M GETTING MAIL ABOUT

Tuitioning to Independent Schools

Two bills currently under consideration, S.66 and H.258, pose an existential threat to schools in the NEK and other rural areas. This is such an obviously bad idea for our area, and so many people have explained why, that I won't take space here to pile on. I will vigorously oppose both bills.

Changes to VT State University

A few weeks ago, the administration of the newly formed VTSU announced it will eliminate physical books in its libraries, in favor of an all-digital format, and downgrade athletic programs at Johnson and VT Tech, both primarily to cut costs. ([VT Digger, 2/8/23](#))

The move provoked an outcry among many students, teachers and staff, and citizens as well. I too am upset. Removing books seems to strike at the heart of an institution of higher learning. It raises the specter of even more draconian cuts, threatening the very viability of VTSU before it even officially begins operation.

I recognize the new president is in a difficult situation. But I hope other avenues can be found, perhaps including additional State resources. I sent a letter to the president urging a second look.

Retirees: Health Insurance; Teacher COLA

Late last year, the Administration proposed moving older retirees from active employees' health plan to Medicare Advantage. It's unclear if that is allowed under the bargaining agreement. Speaker Krowinski and Pro Tem Baruth issued a statement opposing the idea. ([VBiz, 1/20/23](#)) The issue has been strangely quiet in recent weeks.

High inflation was not anticipated six years ago when a cost-of-living adjustment max was agreed to by all, including the teachers' union. But simply raising the rate creates huge deficits in the pension system long term, after difficult compromises only last year. There may be a slim possibility of a one-time adjustment, but I haven't seen action on it yet. Fortunately inflation may be abating.

Join me for Saturday breakfast "office hour"!

March 18 & May 20, 8 AM —

Kitchen Counter Cafe, Railroad St, St J

April 15, 8 AM —

Mooselook Diner, Rte 2, Concord

It is a privilege and an honor to serve as one of your two State Representatives in Montpelier. Thank you for the opportunity.

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