
Guest Commentary

Legislative Report

BY REP. SCOTT CAMPBELL

The 2023 legislative session adjourned last Friday night. The breadth and volume of work always amazes me, but I think this year was even more than usual. In any case it's far too much to cover here, so I offer these highlights.

Child Care. Everyone recognizes the need to greatly improve affordability and accessibility of child care. This year, the Legislature passed a bill (H.217, incorporating S.56) that finally takes a giant step to achieving this. It increases subsidies significantly for low- and middle-income families through the Child Care Financial Assistance Program, and supports both center- and home-based child care providers with substantial rate increases. Total costs are about \$120 million per year, paid for through a payroll tax of 0.44%, of which 0.11% will be paid by employees (that calculates to \$44 per year for someone earning \$40,000).

Housing. The omnibus housing bill, S.100, significantly reduces permit and zoning obstacles to building and retrofitting housing. It increases minimum density requirements especially in areas with municipal sewer and water, loosens Act 250 restrictions on housing development, and reduces parking requirements per dwelling unit. The bill also calls for better integrated local and regional planning, and for recommendations to improve energy code compliance (currently energy codes are mandatory, but lack oversight).

Housing investments in the budget.

Since March 2020 and including the FY24 budget (H.494) just passed, housing supply investments total more than \$500 million, and housing support services (nursing, shelter, family, etc.) total more than \$550 million. These are more ten times greater per year than pre-COVID budgets. It will take time for all this investment to result in actual homes and apartments. It will not alleviate the imminent homelessness crisis as the federally funded motel voucher program expires this month and next; however, the Administration appears to be finally scrambling to address it.

Workforce. This year's workforce bill, H.484, was folded into the budget (H.494). It includes \$74 million in investments in a variety of programs, including tuition assistance and forgivable loans for training in critical occupations (nursing, mental health, teaching, construction trades, etc.); rural business relocation and expansion supports; dairy, ag and forestry supports; and more. This year the Legislature also authorized a number of interstate compacts in health care and mental health specialties; these allow licensed practitioners to work in member states without obtaining separate state-by-state licenses.

Climate change preparation. The year's major climate bill is the Affordable Heat Act, S.5. So much has already been said about this bill, unfortunately much of it misleading and even downright false. What the bill does is authorize the Public Utility Commission to begin designing a system to help households and businesses reduce

reliance on fossil-fuel heating, primarily through subsidies to support weatherization and non-fossil heating equipment. Subsidies are funded through a marketplace of "clean heat credits." The bill requires fuel importers to obtain credits in proportion to the volume of fuel they import, either through implementing "clean heat measures" or acquiring credits from others. The PUC is explicitly required to limit price impacts and balance all costs and benefits. Before the system can be implemented it must be vetted, adjusted and approved in legislation by the next Legislature and Governor in 2025.

Gov. Scott vetoed S.5, and the Legislature overrode his veto last week. Contrary to the Governor's rhetoric, this bill is not about "punishing" Vermonters. It is about adjusting to the inevitable transition — already underway — to far less fossil-fuel dependence in heating our buildings. It is a transition that will take years, perhaps decades. It will not be — it cannot be — entirely cost-free. But further delay only raises costs, increases disruption, and threatens the very folks all of us are most trying to protect: those closest to the edge economically.

If you would like to hear more about these or other bills, please join me at my last scheduled "office hour" breakfast: Kitchen Counter Cafe, Railroad St., St. J., Saturday May 20, 8 a.m. Or contact me at scampbell@leg.state.vt.us.

Rep. Scott Campbell, of St. Johnsbury, serves the Caledonia-Essex House District.