

## December 10

The Legislative Climate Solutions Caucus is holding an online Town Hall next Wednesday, Dec. 15 at 7:00 PM., to review and discuss the Climate Action Plan released by the Climate Council on Dec. 1. Register here: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84451200000>

The Plan is over 260 pages of detailed investigation into the challenges and choices Vermont faces with the rapidly destabilizing climate. How are we going to protect communities, businesses, infrastructure and our economy? How are going to take responsibility for our part of the problem and reduce the Greenhouse Gas emissions contributed by our vehicles, buildings, and businesses?

Some naysayers have scoffed that this is nothing less than a wholesale transformation of our economy, implying that it will destroy our State. While there is no doubt the Climate Plan sets in motion a long-overdue economic transformation, the opportunities presented are enormous. See: transition from horses to cars; pony express to telegraph to telephone; ledger books to computers; and so on.

And the fact is, we have no choice. The world has dug a very deep hole after 150 years of nearly exclusive reliance on fossil fuels, with the United States responsible for more carbon pollution historically than any country. We must stop digging, and that includes Vermont.

The Legislative Climate Solutions Caucus is over 80 members of both House and Senate. Two years ago, the CSC held "roadshows" around the state in preparation for work on the Global Warming Solutions Act. The GWSA passed last fall, and set up the Climate Council and the Climate Action Plan.

Now the Legislature must act to implement the Plan, and the CSC seeks the public's thoughts. (The Council is collecting written comments as well: <https://climatechange.vermont.gov/>, under "Get Involved." The full Plan and other documents are under "Resources.")

These are the first steps of a very long road. There are many needs to balance: spreading the benefits and the costs of transformation equitably; maintaining and improving our existing carbon sinks in farms and forests; preserving and enhancing natural habitats; rebuilding our infrastructure; balancing increased reliance on electricity with stability and cost of supply and the grid. We are fortunate, if that is the word, that the ravages of the pandemic have provided both the financial resources and the social awareness needed to finally start the journey.

Successfully negotiating the energy transition will require all our ingenuity and cooperation. Please join the discussion on Dec. 15.

## November 11

COVID, still.

My wife is a hospice and palliative care doc, my daughter is a hospital nurse; I am quite aware of the toll this pandemic continues to take on all our healthcare providers. They are completely stressed.

Last Friday I wrote a commentary (Caledonian-Record, Nov. 9, and posted on my home page at [CampbellForVermont.com](http://CampbellForVermont.com)). The commentary was prompted by a briefing that morning for NEK legislators by Human Services Secretary Mike Smith and Health Commissioner Mark Levine.

The briefing in turn was prompted by the huge jump in statewide COVID cases the day before, to 498, at that moment many of them in the NEK. Today (Thursday) the state's one-day case count hit another record, 591, with most of the state affected.

The situation is serious. No one wants a return to economic shutdowns to protect our hospital capacity to care for the sickest, both COVID sufferers and others. But I worry that's where we're headed unless we get a grip.

As I say in my commentary, I recognize some people are wary of the vaccine and reject the idea of mandates, even if I don't understand it. I believe it's up to those folks to take other measures to protect the community's and the public's health. Those measures include staying home and wearing masks whenever they are unavoidably around others. And if they want to dine out, attend an event, or mix with others unnecessarily, those who are eligible but decline the vaccine should show a recent negative COVID test.

Today, Speaker Jill Krowinski issued a statement urging Governor Scott to take further action. She said, in part, "Vermonters are absolutely burned out and cannot understand why more is not being done to mitigate the spread in our communities. The Governor has the power and authority to take immediate action, he has before, and I know he can do it again. This is not a political decision; this is a decision that should be made based on following the data and the science. Governor Scott, please take action today to implement a statewide masking policy and utilize other strategies we know will make a difference in protecting Vermonters." (Full text on my website.)

I ended my commentary acknowledging that the Governor and his Administration have more expertise and data than I. Nevertheless, I feel it's time to consider further actions.

### October 16

The 2021 legislative session ended in June, but several committees and task forces have been working intensely since then. Issues urgently needing attention include:

- Pension annual payment costs, benefits and contributions. In Fiscal Year 2019, State payments were 10.5% of the General Fund; in FY22, nearly 14%. Across all funds, the State's \$316 million contribution this year exceeds funding for Labor, Debt Service, Commerce & Community Development, and Higher Education combined. Yet teachers and state workers, promised a pension, cannot be expected to shoulder the burden alone. <https://legislature.vermont.gov/committee/detail/2022/367>
- Unemployment Insurance. The Legislature passed a supplemental \$25/week benefit to begin a week after the Federal supplemental ended. The US Dept of Labor said, not allowed as passed. Unfortunately, the VT DOL did not inform the Legislature before the final day of session when a fix could have been devised, so the additional amount for many struggling to make ends meet will not happen. Many other issues with our UI system are in desperate need, including replacing a 50-year-old computer system and processes for dealing with employee misclassification and fraud. <https://legislature.vermont.gov/committee/detail/2022/370>
- Pupil Weighting. The "weights" assigned to the pupils in a school district effectively determine the funding available and hence property tax rates. There are differential weights for various categories, notably low-income pupils, English-language learners, and rural or small schools. A 2019 study found the weights used for the last 20 years have unfairly short-changed districts with pupils in the above-mentioned categories, including St. Johnsbury and all the NEK. Some districts that have unfairly benefited are resisting changing the system. It's a tough issue that also gets wound around other school funding complexities. <https://ljfo.vermont.gov/committees-and-studies/task-force-on-the-implementation-of-the-pupil-weighting-factors>
- Climate Council. The Global Warming Solutions Act, passed in Sept 2020 over Gov. Scott's veto, set up a 23-member Climate Council charged with crafting a Climate Action Plan by Dec 1, 2021. The Council and five Subcommittees (rural resilience and adaptation; mitigation; equitable benefits; ag and

ecosystems; science and data) are working feverishly to meet this extremely tight deadline. The Council includes eight agency and department heads and fifteen citizens appointed by the House and Senate representing a wide range of stakeholders. The Subcommittees include Council members and other outside experts (no legislators). The Climate Action Plan will set the stage for further legislative action next session. <https://climatechange.vermont.gov/>

I am not serving officially on committees this off-session, but I have been following closely the work of the Climate Council and the mitigation Subcommittee (officially, Cross-Sector Mitigation), as well as the committees determining how we can resume in-person work at the State House. I am also working with the General Assembly's Climate Solutions Caucus (a majority of the Legislature), and together with Reps. Gabrielle Stebbins and Charlie Kimbell, leading an effort to improve coordination and effectiveness of workforce development efforts in the energy transition economy.

At the same time, Vermont is seeing its highest case surge of the pandemic; vaccines, masks and mandates are more polarizing than ever; workforce shortages are critical; and continuing supply chain bottlenecks worryingly threaten inflation. In my view, more robust requirements are justified — and are being implemented by various businesses and organizations — but so far Gov. Scott feels otherwise.

The country seems more dysfunctional than ever, with continuing gridlock in Congress, spiraling wealth disparity, picayune arguments over "virtue signaling" overwhelming serious reckoning with systemic racial and gender inequities, and determined disenfranchisement of non-Euro-descended Americans.

But here in Vermont, we must stick to our knitting. We have plenty of work to do.

My monthly "office hours" were so sparsely attended that I am no longer keeping to a regular schedule. But happy to set one up. Please contact me through email or my website, [CampbellForVermont.com](http://CampbellForVermont.com).

### September 10

Some quick notes.

Armory Bond Vote. St. Johnsbury residents please turn out to vote on the bond authorization to proceed with converting the vacant Armory Building on Main St into a new facility for the village Police Department. The vote is Tuesday, Sept. 14, 10:00am to 7:00pm, at St. J Welcome Center.

This is an important project. It solves a derelict building problem that has defied resolution for 13 years, revitalizes a historic building in the heart of downtown, and keeps the police downtown.

The vote authorizes a bond amount up to \$5.4 million, but the Select Board pledges to seek further funding to reduce the final amount. I urge St. Johnsbury residents to support the bond. Detailed information at <https://www.stjvt.com/armory-redevelopment-project>

Eviction Moratorium. The on-again, off-again prohibition against evicting renters is off again after the U.S. Supreme Court's action two weeks ago. Renter assistance and landlord information at <https://erap.vsha.org/>

Electric Vehicles. Danville Energy Committee, GMP, and NVDA are sponsoring an EV Fair at Marty's First Stop, Sat., Sept. 18, parade at 9:45am, fair 10:00am to 2:00pm. Car owners and dealers will be there, and there will be e-bikes and e-lawn equipment as well. See <https://greenmountainpower.com/gmp-partners-with-customers-in-danville-for-eventure-ride-and-drive-event/>. And GMP is holding a webinar on Sept 21 at 7:00pm; link is posted at <https://www.campbellforvermont.com/events>.

St. Johnsbury Enhanced Energy Plan. NVDA is holding a public hearing on St. J's Enhanced Energy Plan (as previously approved by the Select Board) on Sept 23, 6:00pm, at the Welcome Center. Basically, an "enhanced energy plan" gives the Town far more leverage in Public Utility Commission proceedings about energy generation siting in the Town. Information at <https://www.nvda.net/stjay.php>.

Is there a Climate Crisis? My wife shared a 24-minute video by Neil Halloran entitled "Degrees of Uncertainty: A Skeptical Look at Climate Science." For much of the video I was unsure where he was going to land (though I guess now you can tell by my promoting it here). Stunning graphics and a balanced look at interesting info. <https://www.neilfilms.com/degrees/>

Office Hours. My next constituent breakfast meeting will be Sat., Sept. 18, 8:00am, at Central Cafe on Railroad St., OUTSIDE unless pouring rain.

### August 19

The pandemic returns. And so does controversy. Before widespread availability of vaccines, it was about masks and closures. Now, it's about vaccines, masks and "mandates."

Health Choice VT picketed NVRH on Tuesday against possible vaccine requirements for healthcare workers at the hospital. NVRH is still developing its policy.

Many commenters on FPF have discussed their point of view. Several have mentioned VAERS, the federal government's Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System.

VAERS is a database established in 1990 following enactment of the 1986 National Childhood Vaccine Injury Act. It is maintained by the Centers for Disease Control and the Food and Drug Administration.

VAERS reports helped identify severe reactions during the early rollout of COVID vaccines including blood clots and an allergic reaction called anaphylaxis. The CDC could then quantify the risk and develop recommendations.

According to its website ([vaers.hhs.gov/faq.html](https://vaers.hhs.gov/faq.html)), "VAERS accepts reports from anyone. Patients, parents, caregivers and healthcare providers (HCP) are encouraged to report adverse events after vaccination to VAERS even if it is not clear that the vaccine caused the adverse event. In addition, HCP are required to report certain adverse events after vaccination."

This openness to reporting by anyone is a good thing. But it can also lead to over-reporting and even incorrect reporting in a fearful environment. According to Politifact, an independent and nonpartisan fact-checking service, "the volume of COVID-19 vaccine adverse event reports dwarfs other vaccination categories, creating a huge pool of raw data and distorting comparisons."

Politifact goes on to say, "VAERS has proven to be an effective tool for the CDC, FDA and researchers skilled at interpreting the enormous volumes of data that the system generates. So how should the rest of us analyze those numbers? [Dr. Paul] Offit [director of Vaccine Education Center at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia] has a straightforward answer: We shouldn't."

In summary, "The CDC cautions that VAERS results are not enough to determine whether a vaccine causes a particular adverse event. For the COVID-19 vaccines, VAERS has received a flood of reports and become especially potent fuel for misinformation."

Certainly some people have medical conditions or history indicating they should not get a covid vaccine. Those folks should be especially careful about their contacts with others, now that the delta variant is

widespread. Unfortunately, legitimate medical concerns have gotten caught up in the the ease with which misinformation is spread over the internet (going "viral").

Dr. Mark Levine, VT Health Commissioner, in an hour-long call-in show on VPR Wednesday, discussed the data-driven public health recommendations that have led Vermont to lead the U.S. in its handling of the virus. He responded to a question about how Vermont compares to others such as Florida and Texas: "There is a lot of politicization that has occurred throughout this pandemic.... I think it's unconscionable that politicization would dictate moves that would go against public health completely."

Please join me if you would like to discuss this or other topics. I will be at Cosmic Cup Cafe, Eastern Ave., St., St. J., on Saturday Aug. 21 at 8:00 AM — weather permitting, OUTSIDE ONLY.

### July 29

I have been tied up with family comings and goings since my last post 6 weeks ago. Quite frankly it's been a nice break from Zoom and from politics. Vermont summers are so fine and so fleeting!

But things continue to happen.

This Saturday, July 31:

Meet the Board of the Caledonia Food Coop, 9:00 AM, Cosmic Cup Cafe, Eastern Ave, St. J. Hear progress on building a new coop in St. Johnsbury.

Every Sunday now through Aug. 29, and last show Saturday, Sept. 5:

Free concerts sponsored by Catamount Arts and Levitt AMP, 5:00-7:00 PM, Dog Mountain, 143 Parks Rd, St. J. Dogs welcome. Food trucks, beer garden. (Full disclosure: I'm serving as president of Catamount Arts board this year; I may pass a donation bucket by you at one of the shows!)

Beginning Aug 5:

The St. Johnsbury satellite office of VT DMV reopens at Green Mountain Mall, every Thursday.

Saturday, Aug. 14:

#GetDowntown, free music and entertainment at St. Johnsbury Welcome Center and nearby locations.

During the off-session I am continuing to engage with legislative colleagues on various topics including the forest economy, workforce development, advancing the transition away from fossil fuels, and re-entering the State House next session.

As always I welcome your thoughts and comments. I am holding monthly "constituent breakfasts"; the next one is THIS SATURDAY, JULY 31, 8:00-9:00 AM, at Kitchen Counter Cafe, Railroad St., St. J.

### June 17

The head-spinning 2021 legislative session closed on May 21.

Why head-spinning? The cold fear of Covid. Stressed-out essential workers, business owners, and families struggling with unemployment. The impersonal remove and inefficiency of endless Zoom meetings.

And the incredible amount of unexpected money.

Vermont's pre-Covid FY20 budget was about \$6.1 billion. Last summer, in the midst of the pandemic, projections were the State would be facing more than \$100 million gap in the General Fund for FY22. By January the deficit turned into a nearly \$200 million surplus. The \$7.35 billion FY22 budget just passed includes \$599.2 million in federal ARPA funding and \$161 million (as near as I can tell) in GF one-time money.

As near as I can tell: I've spent hours going over the budget, more and more in awe of the Appropriations committees by the minute. It's complicated in normal times. Add three federal stimulus packages (on top of about \$2 billion in annual federal funding), and there are, as they say, lots of moving parts.

You may have seen other end-of-session reports that offer a laundry list of where all that money went. I'll post my own on [CampbellForVermont.com](http://CampbellForVermont.com). For now, rather than try to find a balance between hundred-million-dollar summary and excruciating detail, I will spare FPF readers any more numbers.

What's important to know, I think, is that your government has done a pretty good job handling the pandemic, without partisan rancor. Republican Governor Phil Scott has been a steady hand on the tiller leading the State's response. The Democratic-led General Assembly has vetted where to deploy all that money thoughtfully and responsibly.

We should honor the successes while acknowledging inevitable slip-ups. A drumbeat of snafus at the Dept of Labor — from UI delays to incorrect 1099s to reports of excessive UI fraud to applications and denials sent to people who never signed up — has been disappointing to say the least. And undoubtedly some initiatives funded this year will be less effective than hoped.

But the federal relief money truly is giving us a unique opportunity to build back better. Beyond merely relief, we are setting the stage for significant progress in housing, broadband, and workforce development, while addressing ongoing responsibilities in clean water, climate change mitigation, pensions and many other areas.

Now that we can gather in person, I would like to invite folks to join me to talk over these and other issues, starting this Saturday, June 19, and continuing monthly. This Saturday, I'll be at Kitchen Counter Cafe, 378 Railroad St, St. J, starting at 8:30 AM. Come if you can!

### April 30

Couple of notes for local restaurant owners and for individuals stuck in Unemployment Insurance limbo.

Restaurateurs: On Monday, May 3, at noon, you may apply for the Restaurant Revitalization Fund. REGISTER NOW at <https://restaurants.sba.gov/requests/borrower/login/?next=/>. Further details and links at [CampbellForVermont.com](http://CampbellForVermont.com).

Unemployment Insurance hearing: House committees on Commerce & Community Development and on Government Operations are holding a joint public hearing on Tuesday, May 4, 5:00 to 7:00 PM. Register to speak at <https://legislature.vermont.gov/links/public-hearing-unemployment>.

If you have been denied, have had an unsatisfactory ruling on appeal, or have had other problems with the Unemployment Insurance system during COVID, I can only imagine how frustrated you must be. Please take this opportunity to tell your story. Your impact will be greatest if you can explain briefly, clearly and respectfully what happened, and what the impact has been on you and your family.

### April 26

On Friday, April 23, the House gave final approval to the Pension Bill, H.449. The day before, the bill had advanced on a roll call vote of 125-22. It now goes to the Senate.

This bill addresses what became a key issue for the 2021 session, following State Treasurer Beth Pearce's report in January. Her recommendations were based on changes made by the VT Pension Investment Committee, attached to her office, following an "experience study" that is done every five years.

The changes VPIC made after the experience study resulted in a \$600 million jump in long-term liabilities and a 50% increase in this year's annual payment — nearly \$100 million — compared to last year's. Although these increases result from a change in calculations, it's important to recognize that that does not make them less real. This year, without massive Federal pandemic funding and an unexpected State surplus, finding \$100 million in the General Fund would have been incredibly difficult.

But that difficulty remains on the horizon, as Federal largesse dissipates. Most concerning, when, not if, the next recession hits, the clash of scarce revenues versus need for services will be greatly exacerbated by the share of the budget required by annual pension fund payments.

H.449 as passed tackles the problem in two steps. First is governance. VPIC will be restructured as an independent Commission, separate from the Treasurer's office, with more financial expertise and training. Its role is managing the investments of the retirement funds and setting actuarial assumptions that are the basis of calculating long-term liabilities and annual required payments. It's critical these functions be professional and immune from political bias.

The second step is setting up a Task Force to analyze the benefit and contribution structure and craft a set of recommendations to begin to close the gap and bring the system to sustainability. This obviously is the most difficult question. All options will be on the table, except that no changes will be made for current retirees or those within 5 years of retirement.

The Task Force will be 15 members: 6 representing union employees, 6 legislators, and 3 members of the administration. Gov Ops originally proposed 4 union reps, and a school board member and business representative. In response to union concerns, the latter 2 were dropped and 2 more union reps were added; however some union advocates feel that union reps should be 50% of Task Force membership in order to rebuild trust lost by the initially proposed benefit cuts and contribution increases.

While I am sympathetic to the trust issue, I don't agree that the 6 legislators should be assumed to be "management." Legislators hold the purse strings on behalf of taxpayers, but also represent teachers, troopers, and other state employees in our districts. If ideas contemplated by the Task Force are truly bad for employees, it's hard to imagine union reps failing to persuade at least 2 of the legislators, thereby achieving a majority.

However, it is true that none of the options are good. Inevitably there will be painful compromises. The Task Force has the extremely difficult job of assembling a package of recommendations that balances and shares responsibility for stabilizing the retirement system, and doing so in time for legislation in January.

We really have no choice. The alternative is not only default on our obligations to public servants. It is also loss of faith in the system; the near-impossibility of recruiting future employees; higher expenses on other social support programs; lower State bond rating and higher borrowing costs; and destabilization of our economy.

A slightly more detailed version of this post is on my website, and has been submitted to the Caledonian-Record. I welcome comments. Reminder of my Friday office hour; sign up at

[CampbellForVermont.com](http://CampbellForVermont.com).

April 22

The General Assembly is in the home stretch and planning for adjournment about May 22.

House Corrections & Institutions, my committee, has been working on a number of initiatives to refocus the corrections system away from mass incarceration and towards preparing offenders to rejoin society — as most will. Obviously this must be done carefully to preserve public safety and respect the victims of crimes.

Work has included adjustments to last year's Act 148, which set up earned time off for good behavior. The new bill, S.18, restricts those already sentenced for certain serious crimes from being eligible to earn time. Another bill, H.20, establishes a pilot project to determine whether pre-trial risk assessment, mental health and substance use screening, and criminal history, provides suitable guidance for setting probation terms and conditions. Both S.18 and H.20 await action by the Governor.

A third corrections bill, H.45, standardizes the availability, process and conditions of probation midpoint review and potential early discharge from probation. H.45 is expected to pass the House on Thursday.

Yet another bill is S.3, regarding competency to stand trial and the insanity defense. The bill includes an evaluation of mental health services currently provided to individuals in custody of Corrections, and also a report on the need for additional services pre-trial. HCI, and Health Care and Judiciary committees are wrapping up work at this writing.

On other topics, the Bottle Bill, H.175, generated a lot of heat during 4 hours of floor debate. It advanced on a vote of 99-46; see my commentary in the Cal-Rec April 21 (also on my website).

H.315, a COVID relief bill that took longer than anyone wished, passed both chambers and Governor Scott allowed it to become law as Act 9 without his signature. The bill uses federal American Rescue Plan Act and state one-time money to provide much needed relief for businesses and individuals, as well as infrastructure and human services funding. The Governor acknowledged the need, but was displeased with use of ARPA funds in this way.

House Government Operations committee finalized work on their bill, H..449, addressing the huge pension issue. I have continued to follow this closely, as it is critical to Vermont's financial stability, as well as to our dedicated teachers, state employees and retirees.

Responding to the concerns of these public servants, Speaker Krowinski and Gov Ops chair Copeland Hanzas agreed to work on the problem in two steps, first, structural changes to pension management, and second, a summer task force of stakeholders to hammer out adjustments to benefits and contributions.

H.449 is the result of much testimony and careful work by Gov Ops. It makes several sensible and needed changes to the VT Pension Investment Committee, including making it an independent Commission no longer within the Treasurer's office. VPIC will be solely responsible for setting actuarial assumptions (which affect the calculation of Unfunded Liabilities) and managing investments.

H.449 also creates a Task Force of 6 union reps, 6 legislators, and 3 administration officials. (Originally it would have included a school board rep and business community rep, and two fewer union reps; but this was changed at the request of the union reps.) The Task Force is charged with recommending changes to pension system design needed to put it on a sustainable long-term course. The Legislature will draft legislation based on the recommendations to be presented next January.

I will get into more detail in an upcoming commentary, to add to two others I've written on the pension problem (see my website). As always, contact me or join me Fridays at 4:00 PM; see

[CampbellForVermont.com](http://CampbellForVermont.com).

April 1



Apologies for lack of updates the last couple of weeks. Zoom world seems even busier than in-person in the Statehouse.

The House has passed numerous consequential bills in the last 10 days. Quick highlights, with salient vote:

- Annual Appropriations (H.439), passed 147-0, includes several one-time investments thanks to federal American Rescue Plan Act.

- Two-Year Capital Bill, (H.438), unanimous voice vote. Much was discussed Feb. 8 post. Funding highlights: Mental Health, Secure Residential Recovery Facility (construction); Women's Correctional Facility (planning & design); and VT State Colleges (major maintenance & transformation).

- Corrections Reform (H.435), unanimous voice, prompted by sexual misconduct at women's facility; discussed in March 13 post.

- Childcare Support (H.171), 146-1, increases support for both families and care workers, as well as system improvements. Costs for families with childcare subsidies will be limited to 10% of income.

- Transportation Bill (H.433), unanimous, increases support for cities and towns, also for the coming electric transition, and for "complete streets" to include safe pedestrian and bikeways.

- Broadband (H.360), 145-1. Builds on 2019 Act 79; provides \$150 million and sets up state office to coordinate communications union districts (of which NEK Community Broadband is one).

- Economic Development (H.159), 148-0. Supports workforce training at State Colleges and UVM; community "place making;" tourism and hospitality.

The hot-button issue that is not even a bill yet is public employee and teacher pensions. My Caledonian-Record commentary from yesterday is on my website. I have listened to much of the testimony in House Government Operations, which is considering the proposal that Speaker Krowinski released last week.

I have not looked the Speaker's proposal in detail, but I will say the idea of setting the minimum age for full benefits at 67 years old is a non-starter. There is more consensus in support of ideas to professionalize the investment committee and require more transparency.

It's easy to cast blame, to say "the state is completely at fault." The reality is more complicated. However it is certainly a problem that has haunted both the Legislature and the Governor for years. The Speaker has shown great courage putting it on the front burner this legislative session — it would be much easier to call for another study and kick the can down the road again. At this point, I am persuaded we cannot do that much longer, if at all.

The focus now is on Gov Ops' testimony and recommendations. I will continue to study the issue, which is not my field of expertise, and to discuss with more knowledgeable colleagues.

Again, you are welcome to join me at my office hour Fridays 4:00-5:00 on Zoom. See [CampbellForVermont.com](http://CampbellForVermont.com) for the link. As I've said before, I don't use facebook, but I will keep updating my website with these posts, commentaries, and other info.

### March 13

Policy "crossover" deadline was yesterday, March 12; bills must be voted out of policy committees by that date. "Money" crossover is next Friday, March 19, when bills affecting spending must be approved. Bills approved by committees then go the floor for vote by the entire House (or Senate). If approved there, a bill then goes to the other body, where it goes through committee process and vote by the whole body. (There's more, but I'll spare you.)

As typical, a flurry of policy bills were voted out yesterday. Here are three I know something about.

(1) My committee, House Corrections & Institutions, unanimously approved a committee bill (no number yet) making several changes to corrections policy. The changes are based on a Jan. 15, 2021, investigation report by Downs Rachlin Martin into sexual misconduct at the Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility in South Burlington, which followed an expose by Seven Days in late 2019.

The bill clarifies that ANY sexual relationship between Dept. of Corrections staff and persons under DOC supervision — whether the staff member is supervising that person or not, whether consensual or not (unless the relationship pre-dated supervision) — is off limits. The bill also sets up a citizen monitoring commission to provide accountability, advice and counsel to the Dept. of Corrections, similar to the State Police Advisory Commission, created 40 years ago. And the bill creates a dedicated Corrections Investigative Unit within DOC charged with investigating issues as they arise. The bill will next go to Appropriations.

(2) My former committee, House Energy & Technology, unanimously approved further support for broadband funding and financing. The bill, H.360, sets up the Vermont Community Broadband Authority to administer a new special Fund to support broadband deployment. The Fund will receive revenues from existing telecom fees and be the conduit for forthcoming Federal funding. It will support regional Communications Union Districts, including our own NEK Community Broadband, as they develop and build out networks. The bill passed Ways & Means (taxes) unanimously this week and is now in Appropriations.

(3) I introduced a bill this year that would set up registration for residential building contractors with the Secretary of State's Office of Professional Regulation. The bill, H.157, is based on a similar bill last session that stalled due to the pandemic, with a few added tweaks. "Registration" is not "licensing;" there is no credential or test required. It would require contact information; liability insurance and being square with the Tax Dept.; and written contracts (which OPR will provide templates for, in case smaller builders don't have them). In exchange, builders would appear on a public listing of contractors, which could also list optional state-approved certifications, and would receive communications such as access to incentives, education and training, updates to codes and standards, and notifications about hazards and working conditions.

These last items are extremely important. Buildings, including single-family homes, have become more complicated as they have become better insulated and air-sealed. The possibilities of poor, even dangerous, indoor air quality, and of mold and moisture damage — to name just a few issues — are far greater now, and will get greater still as we weatherize older buildings. As a life-long builder with 30 years' experience in energy-efficiency, I have seen how important it is that the entire construction industry become better trained.

With money crossover March 19, I may not make office hour next Friday at 4 PM; see the Zoom link at [CampbellForVermont.com](http://CampbellForVermont.com). But please join on a subsequent Friday, or email or call anytime. I also will be posting there a longer mid-session update in the next few days.

### February 27

St. Johnsbury hosts one of the six correctional facilities in Vermont. Society's ideas of best practices in corrections evolve over the years and decades. Stresses arise as facilities last many decades, and often outlive what were accepted best practices when they were built.

I see consensus, if not unanimity, that we have over-incarcerated in this country and in Vermont. Past practices placed emphasis — and expense — on 'warehousing' offenders, squeezing out the kinds of treatment and services people need to successfully rejoin society. Since a high proportion of offenders are themselves traumatized, suffering mental health disorders, and/or self-medicating with black-market drugs, warehousing with little or no treatment results predictably in a high rate of re-offense.

Some people in prison are unlikely ever to be able to return safely to society. But most will get out. There is widening recognition that the focus of incarceration must be on helping offenders become contributing members of the community. That's not easy or cheap. But it is a better long-term investment than continuing a revolving door of mass incarceration.

Changing the focus of the justice and corrections system is huge undertaking. Adapting the physical infrastructure — the prisons themselves — is no small part. Building and maintaining facilities is hugely expensive. Most are aging buildings in need of massive investment; one in particular, the women's facility in South Burlington, is at the end of its useful life. The State is facing an enormous bill whether we update the existing facilities or build new ones focused on re-entering offenders into the community.

And all this is to say nothing about the staffing crisis that is a clear and present danger every day. Corrections officers must work thousands of hours of overtime due being chronically short-staffed. It's an extremely difficult job, and obviously it takes a special kind of person to do it. Dept of Corrections Interim Commissioner Jim Baker seems to be making great progress changing the culture and improving support of corrections staff.

Like so many structural problems facing the State (pensions, school construction), DOC issues have been building for years, and will take years to resolve. House Corrections & Institutions continues to work on it.

As for school construction, the State moratorium on State aid goes back to 2008. The aid formula had been 30% of eligible costs, and the backlog of the State's bill at that point was nearly \$100 million. The moratorium was to allow State bonding capacity to catch up, which it finally did in 2016. A bill now in House Education committee would inventory needs around the State, require the Agency of Ed to update school facilities standards and develop a capital outlay plan, and require school districts to have capital improvement plans and certified facilities managers. My committee was asked to review; I am hopeful we are finally starting to make progress on this front. St. Johnsbury School is only about 20 years old and still in good shape; neighboring districts, especially Kingdom East, are not so fortunate.

One other item of note: State efforts to build out Electric Vehicle charging network will be bearing fruit in St. Johnsbury. As more car companies commit to an electric future, providing locations for out-of-town travelers to charge is becoming more vital. St. Johnsbury's location at the intersection of two interstates and U.S. Route 2, with downtown restaurants and amenities close by, makes it an ideal location. The State-funded fast-charger will be located on Railroad St. in front of the Welcome Center.

Green Mountain Power is also offering incentives for businesses to install EV chargers for their employees and customers, and also a variety of incentives for GMP customers to purchase electric vehicles, bicycles, lawn equipment, and even Harley-Davidson motorcycles. Contact [Freeman.CoreyJr@GreenMountainPower.com](mailto:Freeman.CoreyJr@GreenMountainPower.com).

The Legislature has next week off, and I will NOT be holding office hour on Friday March 6. Please join me on a future Friday at 4:00 PM; see [CampbellForVermont.com](http://CampbellForVermont.com) for the Zoom link.

## February 16

COVID Vaccinations. Vermonters age 70 and older are eligible to register for the vaccine starting today. As before, people are asked to sign up ONLINE (not by phone): <https://www.healthvermont.gov/covid-19/vaccine/getting-covid-19-vaccine>.

Health Insurance. Also starting today, and through May 14, any uninsured Vermonter can take advantage of a special enrollment period to sign up with Vermont Health Connect, and may also be eligible for premium and cost-sharing assistance. People deemed ineligible in the past may apply again. More information is at <https://info.healthconnect.vermont.gov/QualifyingEvents>. But in this case, signup is NOT online; instead CALL 855-899-9600.

Two legislative items about schools you may be hearing about:

Pupil Weighting Study. Act 60 (1997), in response to the Brigham decision requiring equitable funding of schools, assigned pupils different "weights" depending on various factors such as a school district's poverty level, size of school, size of district, number of English language learners, and so on.

Act 173 of 2018 directed the Agency of Education to study the existing system for weighting students for funding purposes. AOE released the final report in December 2019. It found that the system is arbitrary and not based on research or science, and recommended significant adjustments, especially to the poverty factor.

Rep. Laura Sibilila has been working this issue for years and introduced H.54 this session to implement the weighting recommendations. The bill, which I signed on to cosponsor, is under consideration in the Education committee. The new weights would make funding reflect much more closely the costs districts face to educate their students. The existing system has winners (e.g., districts with lower special-needs costs that can afford enhanced programs) and losers (districts with higher costs that cannot afford such programs). The new system would rebalance funding, and today's losers will see some relief and winners will see higher costs; how much is still to be determined, but H.54 does include a phase-in period to lessen the year-to-year adjustment. The important point is that implementing the weighting study will greatly advance equitable access to education, as required by law and the Vermont Constitution.

H.81, Public School Benefits. Act 11 of 2018 set up a statewide negotiation for school employees' health insurance. H.81 removes a provision of Act 11 that stipulates that all employees pay the same premium and same out-of-pocket co-pay, and allows support staff (who are generally paid much less than teachers) to negotiate their own deal, separate from teachers. Note that H.81 is silent on what that deal may be, since that is a matter for collective bargaining. Another bill, H.63, proposed slightly different changes, and sections from it were incorporated in H.81.

As always, please join me for my weekly office hour Fridays 4:00-5:00, or contact me anytime: [CampbellForVermont.com](http://CampbellForVermont.com).

## February 8

As mentioned in an earlier post, this term I serve on the House Corrections and Institutions (HCI). This committee deals with policy and oversight of the Department of Corrections, and also handles development of the "Capital Bill."

The Capital Bill, along with general fund appropriations (the "Big Bill") and the Transportation Bill, is a "money bill." All three are must-pass bills that fund State government services. The Capital Bill pays for long-term investments in construction and maintenance projects using "bonded," or borrowed, funds.

Much like a family takes out a mortgage to buy a house, or a home-equity loan to replace a roof, the State borrows money by selling bonds for these kinds of projects.

HCI has received background and updates on a number of corrections policy issues. However our work for the next month or so will focus on the Capital Bill.

The State owns over 200 buildings and leases over 100 other spaces. Maintaining these properties in good repair — and replacing when necessary — is not only prudent, it also is required to preserve the State's bond rating.

A Capital Debt Affordability Advisory Committee oversees the State's bonded debt picture and recommends an amount the State should bond for during the two-year Capital Bill cycle. This biennium the amount is \$123.8 million.

As you might guess, it never goes far enough. Capital expenditures touch on nearly all of State government. HCI hears testimony from several departments and agencies as well as the Judicial branch. A key department connecting all is Buildings and General Services, which handles planning, construction, maintenance and security of State properties.

A small sample of pressing issues right now includes —

- updating HVAC systems due to covid in all buildings but especially courthouses so that jury trials, which have been suspended since last March, can resume;
- completing replacement of the secure residential mental health facility in Middlesex that was installed temporarily after Tropical Storm Irene nearly 10 years ago;
- updating or replacing outdated correctional facilities, especially the women's prison in South Burlington;
- addressing the state's housing shortage, both of affordable and workforce housing;
- funding Vermont State Colleges' maintenance and transformation.

Locally, we have priorities as well, like replacing the Agency of Human Services offices that relocated from Eastern Avenue due to ground contamination a few years ago, and maintenance and upgrades to the Northeast Regional Correctional Facility. (The Lamoille Valley Rail Trail was bonded for last session and is now being executed by VTrans.)

As I write this, I realize it probably doesn't sound very sexy to most people. Downright boring in fact! But it is actually important. I read somewhere that Joe Biden once observed, "Don't tell me your priorities. Show me your budget and I'll tell you what your priorities are." Balancing priorities is slow and detailed work. It is what you elected your representatives to do.

### January 31, 2021

State Treasurer Beth Pearce's report to the Legislature about the condition with the State's retirement pension system for our teachers and State employees arrived two weeks ago, and it's grim reading. It is also complicated.

Vermont has three pension systems, one for public school Teachers, one for State Employees, and one for Municipal Employees. The Municipal system is funded locally; Teachers and State Employees systems

are the responsibility of the State. (In addition, Teachers and Employees receive Other Post-Employment Benefits (OPEBs), primarily health care — a separate but related obligation.)

State Employees include all who receive a State of Vermont paycheck, except "exempt" employees. Exempts include statewide elected officials; agency and department heads, deputies, and executive assistants; and certain others. Members of the Legislature do not qualify for any pension system (though we can access a pre-tax savings plan).

Teachers and Employees pension systems are Defined Benefit (DB), meaning the future benefit payout is calculated in advance and guaranteed; Teachers and Employees do make a fixed negotiated contribution from their paychecks, but the risk falls on the State to ensure funds are available when they retire. Exempts are eligible for an optional Defined Contribution (DC) plan, which means they may make a pre-tax contribution and the State will contribute a match; but the future benefit is not assured and the risk falls on the exempt employee.

Vermont's pension crisis has been building for decades. In 2007/08, close to having it under control, the Legislature enacted a plan to fully retire the deficit by 2038. But the total deficit started building faster due to the Great Recession, changing demographics, increased teacher turnover and retirement, investment return shortfalls, and general economic factors. Today and for the foreseeable future, even with more than \$100 million annually from the General Fund, we are falling further and further behind.

Treasurer Pearce's report includes recommendations for painful adjustments to rein in the runaway deficit, including reduction in Cost Of Living Adjustments (COLAs) and changes to the benefit calculation for future — not current — retirees. No one likes that, including her. But she also proposes maintaining a DB system instead of changing to DC, as the most advantageous not only to retirees but also to Vermont's economy, and most cost-effective for taxpayers. She also proposes paying down the deficit as much as possible this year with one-time Federal funds. Having observed her priorities, her diligence and integrity as Treasurer, I believe she is proposing what she feels is in the best interest of all — retirees, employees and taxpayers.

Still, the Treasurer's recommendations are just that. The Legislature ultimately must decide. I share the concerns I have heard from many teachers about the reduction of expected benefits. I also realize we must act to protect the system from even harsher adjustments. From my limited knowledge thus far, I think increases to employee contributions for current workers, and perhaps reduction in the calculated benefit for future retirees, would be fairer than reduced COLAs. I will be paying careful attention as the various committees take up this vital issue.

Write to me with your thoughts, [scampbell@leg.state.vt.us](mailto:scampbell@leg.state.vt.us), or join me during my weekly "office hour," Fridays from 4:00 to 5:00 PM on Zoom; see link at [CampbellForVermont.com](http://CampbellForVermont.com).

January 22, 2021

COVID vaccine update:

Health care personnel and residents at long-term care facilities are eligible for vaccinations now.

Starting Monday, Jan. 25, Vermont residents 75 years old and older are eligible to register for appointments. Information about how to register will be posted at [www.healthvermont.gov/myvaccine](http://www.healthvermont.gov/myvaccine). You must register in advance, and registering online is strongly preferred; seek assistance of family or friends if needed. Appointments will start Jan. 27.

Following that group, residents age 70 and older will be eligible, and then 65 and older. More than 90% of Vermont's COVID deaths have been 65 or older. Vermont has about 125,000 people in this age group.

How quickly this group is completed depends on how many doses Vermont receives; as mentioned before, recent shipments have been less than 9,000 per week. Hopes are the new federal Administration will implement far more effective plans than the previous one.

Following completion of the age 65 and older group, those with various medical conditions are expected to be prioritized. More will be determined as that time approaches, in a matter of 2 or 3 months.

Unemployment: The Legislature passed its second bill, S.9, which extends Unemployment Insurance benefits to 30 days past the end of the state of emergency. The Governor is expected to sign it.

Committee: House Corrections & Institutions has been taking background testimony on corrections policy including sexual misconduct at the women's prison in South Burlington; working conditions and mandatory overtime for Correctional Officers; last session's Justice Reinvestment Act; and racial disparities in the justice system. We also heard from Treasurer Beth Pearce on the State's bond rating and capacity, as background for the Capital Budget bill. The Capital Bill connects with many facets of State government and funds long-term construction and maintenance of state buildings. It will consume most of our time through mid-March.

I submitted a bill that would set up a registry of residential building contractors. It is resubmission of part of a Senate bill last term with minor updates, and is supported by the Office of Professional Regulation, which planned to submit the bill if I did not, and by the Attorney General's Office. Their interest is fraud prevention and setting a process for handling fraud when it does occur. My interest, in addition to that, is that registration would also include voluntary certifications in various building technologies. This would provide a pathway to advance education and training, and raise the knowledge base and skill level of the industry.

Next Tuesday Governor Scott delivers his budget address. House Appropriations and my committee then begin our analysis of the Administration's proposals.

Reminder that I will be available for "office hours" on Fridays from 4:00 to 5:00 PM. Please sign up using the Zoom link on my website [CampbellForVermont.com](https://CampbellForVermont.com) by noon if possible so I know you are coming!

### January 15, 2021

Vaccine roll-out plans continue to evolve. Here's the latest as I understand it.

Phase one, nearing completion, was for health-care workers (including EMTs and mental health providers) and long-term care residents and workers. The Dept of Health's dashboard (<https://www.healthvermont.gov/covid-19/vaccine/covid-19-vaccine-dashboard>) shows almost 29,000 people have received at least the first dose, with 4,000 of those having completed both doses.

With the state receiving about 9,000 doses per week, the State expects to start phase two as early as next week. Phase two will vaccinate seniors by age, first over 75, then over 70, then over 65; and also others with serious health conditions (still to be defined precisely). This differs from the Centers for Disease Control initial guidance to simplify administration, and because most deaths are in the elder population.

Teachers and other "frontline" workers are concerned about being left out of phase two. It's obviously a difficult choice. The Governor will be announcing more details in his press conference Friday.

Town Meeting: The House made haste to pass a bill on Tuesday giving towns and municipalities (school districts, waste districts, etc.) flexibility to hold annual meetings later than usual. The Senate passed the

same today (Thursday) and Governor Scott is expected to sign quickly, so towns and schools especially can make plans. Several towns, including St. Johnsbury, have indicated a desire to consider meeting when warmer weather would allow an outdoor meeting.

Committee assignment: This term I am serving on Corrections & Institutions, which handles not only corrections policy but also the capital budget bill. The capital budget covers bonded financing for long-term projects including construction and rehab of state buildings and much else. (Completion of the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail was authorized in last year's capital bill.) I look forward to having a hand in decisions that directly affect our town and region.

This year's remote session is every bit as non-stop as a regular in-person session. Committees are now set up to meet every day whenever we are not on the "floor." This entails significant home office set-up for many legislators. Leadership has determined members are eligible for \$75 per diem expense allowance to help defray the cost of computers, monitors, office furniture, printers and supplies, and so on.

Compliments to Rep. Scott Beck for his informative FPF post on Jan. 11, followed by a forthright denunciation of Trump's incitement of violence at the Capitol, and publicly calling for his party's leadership do the same.

### January 7, 2021

I weep today for my country.

My country is a nation defined not by ethnicity, but by ideals. It is defined by a commitment to a democratically elected government and the rule of law.

We saw that commitment in tatters yesterday. The leader of our national government incited a riot. The scenes at the U.S. Capitol were appalling. The response of the President, and many of those who have coddled him and his bullying and lies, was, and continues to be, appalling.

Nevertheless, your Vermont Legislature began work yesterday. We should be rightfully proud that we are led this biennium by a group of capable, experienced leaders who are nearly all women: Rep. Jill Krowinski, Speaker of the House; Rep. Emily Long, House Majority Leader; Rep. Patti McCoy, House Minority Leader; Rep. Selene Colburn, House Progressive Leader; Lt. Gov. Molly Gray; Sen. Becca Balint, Senate President Pro Tem (Majority Leader); Sen. Randy Brock, Senate Minority Leader.

We should also be proud of Governor Phil Scott's strong and principled statement yesterday afternoon, in which he called for the removal of the President, a member of his own party. The Legislature will be issuing its own resolution today calling for the President's removal by the Cabinet or Congress, or by his voluntary resignation.

I will begin again posting weekly updates of issues relevant to St. Johnsbury and the NEK, beginning next week. I look forward to serving my constituents and the entire state — and nation. I am honored, and I thank you for the opportunity to serve.

Please contact me with any thoughts or concerns at any time: [scampbell@leg.state.vt.us](mailto:scampbell@leg.state.vt.us), or 595-5580 (before 9:00 PM please!). I will be posting these updates, commentaries, and other items to my website, [CampbellForVermont.com](http://CampbellForVermont.com).

Please note I will resume a weekly "office hour" via Zoom on Fridays, 4:00-5:00 PM; a link is on my website homepage. The first office hour will be tomorrow, Jan. 8.