

January 19, 2023

The 2023-24 biennium began with a bang January 4. With one-third new members in both House and Senate, reconfigured committees in the House with 9 of 13 new chairs, and a historic Democratic majority, expectations are high.

Major issues at this point are continuing work on the toughest problems: housing, childcare, workforce, and the impacts of climate change.

In housing, a bill has been introduced to reduce regulatory barriers to building more housing, and at higher density in village centers. Town-level zoning regulations, though crafted in good faith, sometimes effectively prevent new housing. The bill would require towns to allow, for example, smaller lot sizes, and even two-family homes where only single-family is permitted now. No doubt there will be much debate. But all parties and the administration agree it's time to have that debate.

Childcare. The Legislature last session commissioned a study to assess how to increase access, reduce costs for families, and increase pay and working conditions for providers. The study was released on Tuesday. I have not reviewed it closely, but the headline is, no surprise, dramatically improving our creaky childcare system is expensive. But it is hard to think of a more important or timely investment than giving the next generation the best care possible and allowing parents to work knowing their kids are safe and thriving.

Workforce. Everyone agrees we need more young working families. Better childcare is obviously a key issue. If the pandemic taught us anything, it's that the need for worker flexibility and time off for sickness or family needs is also critical. The Legislature will propose a Paid Family and Medical Leave Insurance program again this year. The Governor has vetoed past efforts, but hopes are the Administration will engage to help craft the best program.

Climate change. I have said repeatedly that Vermont's climate change challenge is not stopping it (we can't, of course), but coping with it. We have to adapt to rapid changes in the environment, and even more rapid changes in the world economy. Fossil fuels will be around for a long time, but prices -- always up and down -- will be even more volatile and unsustainable. The energy transition is underway, and we must prepare for affordable electric vehicles and much higher standards for buildings.

I serve on the Transportation Committee this term, so strategies for coping with climate change will be a hot topic. How to bring EVs, hybrids, and higher-MPG vehicles to within the budgets of more people; how to provide charging options for car owners without driveways; how to build a far better public transit system for people who can't -- or don't want to -- drive; these issues will be on the agenda this year along with roads and bridges.

Reminder of my monthly 'open office' over breakfast on the third Saturday of the month at 8:00 AM, alternating between Kitchen Counter Cafe in St. Johnsbury and Mooselook Diner in Concord. I will start at Kitchen Counter this Saturday, Jan. 21. Please join me to discuss issues and concerns.

January 3, 2023

Happy New Year, neighbors! It's a good time to resume my Legislative Updates for St. Johnsbury residents, and welcome constituents in Concord and Kirby.

The General Assembly begins a new biennium Jan. 4, with one-third of its members newly elected. Nine of 14 House committee chairs did not run again, giving the Speaker an option of adjusting topic areas

covered by each committee, and perhaps even the number of committees. We find out what the committees are and who's on them on the first day.

Speaker Jill Krowinski was unanimously nominated on Dec 3 by the Democratic caucus, which holds 104 of the 150 seats; though formal election by the entire House occurs when the session begins, she undoubtedly will continue as Speaker.

Besides campaigning, my summer and fall was busy with updates and conferences involving many organizations and issues, including: Let's Grow Kids on childcare needs; VT Housing Finance Agency's statewide housing conference; NEK Collaborative's annual conference; Northeast Kingdom Human Services; Public Service Dept; Northeast VT Regional Hospital; legislative climate caucus; Agency of Human Services; Joint Fiscal Office budget briefing; paid leave and childcare summit; VT State College update; and more. I have also been participating in discussions regarding reintroduction and changes to last year's Clean Heat Standard to address the Governor's and others' concerns. It's not really a PART-time job!

Two items I would like to highlight:

First, the Weatherization Repayment Assistance Program (WRAP) is a pilot program launching in 2023 that offers an innovative way to pay for efficiency and heating system improvements, without a personal or home-equity loan. Instead, the upfront cost will be provided through a state appropriation, and repayment will be through a line-item your electric bill.

The idea is that by offering flexible terms the repayment will be less than the savings from improvements. And with repayment tied to the electric bill, the debt will be connected to the property rather than carried by the household. Since future occupants of the home will also benefit from the improvements, they will assume responsibility for repayment until the work is paid off.

The program will be open to all Vermonters, though the majority of funding will be targeted to moderate-income folks earning between 80% and 120% of area median income. (Lower-income households can access the traditional Weatherization Assistance Program through NETO, <http://www.vtneto.org/>.)

Details are still being worked out, but here is the initial announcement: <https://vhfa.org/news/blog/new-weatherization-financing-program-available-vermonters>.

Second item: You may have heard about an "FCC challenge" process now underway. If not, here's why it's important. The current broadband service providers have claimed to the Federal Communications Commission that they have near-100% coverage in Vermont. Obviously we all know that is not true.

The FCC challenge process is to determine what areas are actually unserved or underserved. The 2021 Infrastructure bill includes \$65 billion in federal funding to support broadband deployment to those areas. Millions could be available to Vermont, and it's a crucial funding source for the NEK.

The challenge process in our area is being coordinated by NEK Broadband, our communications union district. Later this week or early next, they will be providing information about how residents can help document lack of broadband service. I will include a link to that info in my next Legislative Update.

Thank you again for your confidence in re-electing (or electing) me. It is an honor to serve as your Representative. I will resume my monthly 'open office' over breakfast on the third Saturday of the month at 8:00 AM, alternating between Kitchen Counter Cafe in St. Johnsbury and Mooselook Diner in Concord. I will start at Kitchen Counter on Jan. 21. Please join me to discuss issues and concerns.