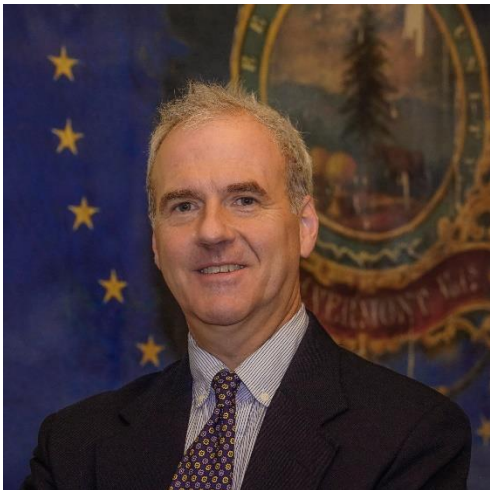


2021 TOWN MEETING REPORT

Representative David Durfee



Thank you for entrusting me again with the responsibility of representing you in Montpelier. The Legislature has been operating remotely this session, and while the process is slower than usual, there is a shared commitment across state government to address the pandemic’s social and economic impacts while keeping everyone safe. Our goal is to position the state to recover quickly while tackling both new and ongoing challenges that have been exposed by the pandemic. This newsletter provides an update on some of the many bills under consideration at the State House. Please be in touch with me if you have any questions.

-David Durfee

EMERGING STRONGER POST-COVID

Ensuring a Lasting, Equitable Recovery

The COVID-19 pandemic has been an unprecedented public health emergency. In response, the legislature has worked hard to help everyone who was affected. We dedicated more than \$60 million in hazard pay to our essential workers, allocated the resources necessary for long-term care facilities to deliver services safely to older Vermonters, and assisted mental health and substance use counselors to operate remotely through telehealth. We provided the resources to sustain childcare and afterschool programs, and supported organizations that assist our most vulnerable Vermonters.

With the vaccine roll-out well underway, we expect the next round of federal funding to continue supporting our communities. These funds will further assist the state’s COVID testing, contact tracing and vaccination efforts. Emergency rental assistance will be provided to help those who cannot pay rent or utility bills. Childcare providers will receive a boost in funding, as will mental health and substance use prevention programs. The legislature looks forward to continuing to work with our communities to ensure that relief efforts go to those who need it most.

Broadband: Supporting Rural Buildout

Access to high-speed internet is essential to daily life. We use the internet to go to work, attend school, see a doctor, interact with government, and connect with our community and the world. Unfortunately, the promise of modern communications has bypassed many in our rural Vermont communities.

H.360 aims to accelerate community broadband deployment throughout Vermont. Key elements include: funding for pre-construction expenses,

expanded grants and loans for building broadband infrastructure in unserved and underserved areas, a new workforce development program, and protections for Vermonters’ privacy and unrestricted access to the Internet. This bill would bring over \$50 million of new capital to support the construction of community-based fiber assets in the most underserved areas.

The bill also establishes a new entity to coordinate and fund broadband buildout, to support Vermont’s regional communications union districts (CUDs) and their partners, and to advocate at the federal level for programs and policies that will accelerate the deployment of universal broadband in rural Vermont.

Accessible and Affordable Childcare

High-quality childcare is a critical investment in Vermont’s future. By improving access and affordability for Vermont’s families, we help parents stay employed and contribute to their local economies. By increasing childcare worker wages, we can support and grow our early educator workforce. By prioritizing the well-being and development of our children, we are giving the next generation a leg up on success.

Reforms proposed in H.171 are based on feedback from Vermont’s parents, providers, employers, and community members. Not only does H.171 make childcare more affordable, it removes barriers to access, ensures fair wages for providers, establishes workforce development programs, and lays the groundwork to identify future revenue sources.

We know that childcare is essential to keeping our communities strong. Meanwhile, Vermont’s child care system is sorely in need of resources. H.171 is a significant step towards funding child care in a way that reflects its true value to our state.

Budget Update

The state’s fiscal outlook has improved dramatically since this year’s budget was finalized amid much uncertainty in September. Tax revenues (particularly sales, income, and property transfer) have been higher than expected, and the state’s economists are forecasting a surplus when the year ends in June.

Vermont has also received a tremendous influx of federal dollars during the pandemic, with additional funds anticipated in the near future. These one-time funds are intended to be used to address the health and economic damage caused by the restrictions put in place to prevent the spread of Covid.

Tax Structure Commission Report

Periodically, the Vermont Legislature charges an independent tax commission with looking across our system of taxation to make recommendations for the future. Their report includes recommendations for moving to a fully income-based system of education taxes, broadening the sales tax base to include services (while lowering the tax rate), and seeking to tax wealth more accurately through capital gains, estate tax changes, and more. Their recommendations are not immediately actionable but will help guide our work over the next few years.

School Construction: Taking Stock & Studying Funding

Many of the state’s school buildings, including our high school, are aging and have significant deferred maintenance needs. Vermont is currently the only state in New England without a school construction funding program: with the exception of emergency projects, our aid program has been suspended since 2007. Proposed legislation would update school facility standards and authorize a statewide needs assessment survey for all school buildings, with a report on funding options due in December 2022. Improving the physical learning space will lead to healthy, energy-efficient facilities and better educational outcomes.

Transportation Modernization

H. 94, the Transportation Modernization Act, seeks to save Vermonters money and reduce climate pollution. Its key provisions would:

- expand existing programs like the state electric vehicle) incentive and Mileage Smart
- make it easier for low- and moderate-income Vermonters to purchase low- and zero-emissions vehicles that are cheaper to fuel and maintain
- continue fare-free transit to eliminate transportation costs for people who might not be able to afford it otherwise
- expand the Complete Streets program and improving high-traffic corridors for cyclists and pedestrians

Two recent funding rounds granted approximately \$1 million to add roughly 30 charging stations across Vermont. The next round will dedicate about \$1.7 million to fill gaps in the fast-charging network along highway corridors. Once constructed, these new charging stations will put fast chargers within about 30 miles of almost every address in Vermont.

Weatherization: Energy Savings & Healthier Homes

Vermont has some of the most energy-inefficient housing stock in the nation. Addressing this issue can help our state meet its climate goals, save Vermonters money, improve our local economy, and help citizens be more comfortable and healthier in their homes. The legislature will be providing increased support for accelerated weatherization programs. Weatherizing a home often pays for itself in less than five years and provides continued reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, energy costs, and health care costs, while increasing public health, for many years into the future.

2021 LEGISLATIVE DIGEST

So far this session, the House has passed pandemic-related legislation to:

- ✓ Extend workers compensation
- ✓ Provide financial relief to businesses and schools, and the neediest Vermonters
- ✓ Authorize alternative procedures for Town Meetings

Other legislation passed in 2021:

- ✓ Limits liability for agritourism
- ✓ Allows non-licensed school employees to bargain for health care
- ✓ Tightens laws regarding sexual exploitation of children
- ✓ Authorizes the annual budget adjustment

IN THE PIPELINE

- A comprehensive broadband bill
- Childcare bill (H.171)
- Transportation Modernization Act
- Clarifying Use of Force
- Community Schools
- Increasing Recovery Beds
- Expanded Bottle Bill

COVID-19 VACCINE UPDATE

The Health Department is working closely with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to distribute vaccines as they become available. Beginning March 8, teachers and anyone age 55 and older with certain pre-existing conditions can make appointments to get vaccinated. Childcare workers and others with pre-existing conditions will be eligible the following week. You can learn more and sign up for weekly emails at: healthvermont.gov

The information in this newsletter is compiled from reports prepared by various House committees, and only scratches the surface of the work taking place in Montpelier this session. If you would like more information on a particular issue or piece of legislation not covered here, please contact me.