

2021 Town Meeting Report

Representative Erin Brady

Chittenden 2: Williston



Thank you for your trust in me. It's an honor to serve as your State Representative. The 2021-2022 biennium began as no other like it, in total virtual mode with legislators "zooming in" from 150 locales across Vermont. We are mimicking the schedule of a normal in-person session, though the process of legislating remotely 5-7 hours per day is somewhat slower than normal. My priority is advancing policies that will create an equitable COVID recovery plan to rebuild the economy in all 14 counties and help our families and communities thrive. This newsletter provides an update on some of the many bills under consideration at the State House in 2021. Please be in touch with me if you have any questions or to discuss issues.

Federal COVID Support: Dollars Flowing from DC

Since the early weeks of the pandemic in 2020, the COVID-related dollars flowing to Vermont from Washington have been substantial. As of early December, approximately \$5 billion had come to Vermont, much passing directly to agencies and departments for specified COVID relief purposes.

Within this amount was the \$1.25 billion that became the Coronavirus Relief Fund (CRF), from which the legislature had authority to appropriate dollars. Allocations ranged from assistance to dairy and non-dairy farms, working lands, state parks and other public lands to internet connectivity, health care stabilization, and child care and adult days; from a variety of economic business sectors, both for-profit and nonprofit, to UVM and the VT State Colleges system; from municipalities and pre-K-12 school districts to all manner of housing and justice-related entities.

With the vaccine roll-out well underway, we are expecting the next round of federal funding to continue supporting our communities. These federal 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.

My committee work: Education Committee

The focus of the Education Committee's work this year has been equity and the intentional allocation of educational resources, instruction, access, and opportunities according to need. We started by hearing updates from Vermont schools on their COVID-19 response plan, and how schools will continue to move all students forward into the recovery and learning re-engagement phase. Common themes emerged: the most at-risk students need critical supports, the social and emotional needs of students are significant, access to stable internet has been an ongoing challenge, staffing is difficult due to COVID, and capacity and resources have been seriously stretched. Through all these challenges, staff and students have shown remarkable innovation and resiliency.

School Construction: Taking Stock & Studying Funding

Built decades ago, it's no secret that many of Vermont's school buildings are aging and in dire need of repair. We are working on addressing the state of our school buildings and significant deferred maintenance needs by moving forward with a committee bill ([DR 21-0782](#)). 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. The proposed language starts with an update of the school facility standards and a statewide needs assessment survey for all school buildings. It also includes a report on funding options due in December 2022. Improving the physical learning space yields healthy and energy-efficient facilities and better educational outcomes.

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Early Literacy: Shoring Up the Foundation

Literacy is a foundational learning skill, and the work begins in the earliest grades. COVID-19 learning recovery and the need to improve Vermont's literacy test scores has driven our work on [H.101](#), which provides grant funding to build systems-driven, sustainable literacy supports for students. Effectively supporting literacy instruction requires a systematic and sustained effort to ensure that all students learn to read by the end of third grade. To help meet this goal, H.101 would allow groups of supervisory unions to work together to improve literacy teaching, provide coaching, measure outcomes, and ensure that students who struggle are identified and receive instruction from highly qualified instructors.

Ambitious Plan for Childcare System

High-quality childcare is an investment in Vermont's future. By increasing 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 of Vermonters a head start to success.

I am proud to be a cosponsor of [H.171](#) to make these investments a reality. The reforms offered in this bill 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 creates a study to identify future revenue sources.

Tax Structure Commission Recommendations

Approximately every 10 years, the Vermont Legislature charges an independent tax commission with looking across our system of taxation to make recommendations for the future. We just received a [draft of their report](#), and it includes recommendations for moving to a fully income-based system of education taxes, broadening the sales tax base, 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 biennium.



STATE OF VERMONT
House of Representatives

Transportation Modernization Act

The [Transportation Modernization Act of 2021](#), which I cosponsored with 70 colleagues, moves climate and equity goals into the Transportation Budget Bill. The bill seeks to:

- Save Vermonters money
- Reduce climate pollution
- Expand existing programs like the state electric vehicle (EV) 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 improve high-traffic corridors for cyclists and pedestrians.

These costs associated would ideally be funded through the increased federal monies that are coming to Vermont to support transportation. The committee will work with the Administration to find the right financial allocations for these goals.

Pensions: Bridging the Unfunded Gap

State pensions are grabbing lots of headlines recently. Vermont oversees the pension management for three groups: state employees; teachers in pre-K to 12 schools; and municipal workers. The upkeep and viability of these funds is a vital oversight concern for the Legislature. In a [January report](#), Treasurer Beth Pearce recommended changes that would significantly reduce the \$4.5 billion unfunded pension and other retirement liabilities — for example, increasing employee contributions, or reducing cost-of-living adjustments for future retirees — but it's important to remember that her report is just a starting point. The Speaker has committed to bringing together all stakeholders to craft an equitable solution, and the Government Operations Committee has so far heard from the Joint Fiscal Office, Treasurer Pearce and key employee groups. The process of determining the best course of action will be time-consuming and laborious. Stay tuned.

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. Right now, people in Vermont age 70+ can make appointments to get vaccinated. Starting March 1, those 65+ will be eligible. You can learn more and sign up for weekly emails at:

<https://www.healthvermont.gov/covid-19/vaccine>