

2024 Town Meeting Report

Rep. David Durfee

Bennington-3: Shaftsbury | Sunderland | Glastenbury



The 2024 Legislative session has reached its midpoint. Below I've provided some information on a few of the bills that have been introduced and passed so far. We will continue to debate bills and consider investments prior to our May adjournment. Please don't hesitate to contact me anytime if I can be of assistance. My contact information is listed on the back of this report. It continues to be a privilege to serve as your state representative.

David Durfee



MODERNIZING ACT 250

With the housing shortage and threats from the changing climate taking on more urgency, the legislature is examining how to better promote growth while continuing to protect our communities, air, water, wildlife, forests and working lands. Since 1970, our statewide land use law, Act 250, has helped support compact development in downtowns and village centers while protecting forests and open lands. Last summer, a working group convened by the Natural Resources Board collaborated on updates to Act 250 to facilitate building in the right places and better protect natural resources. After months of work, consensus emerged on several updates. [H.687](#) is a comprehensive bill that combines those recommendations with related regional planning and statewide designation program updates. The bill seeks a balanced approach to improving the effectiveness and consistency of the Natural Resources Board in issuing Act 250 permits and handling appeals. It proposes a new location-based oversight system that creates three tiers: downtowns and village centers, where housing and development would be encouraged; rural areas, where permitting would continue; and the most ecologically sensitive areas where development would be discouraged. To encourage rural landowners to keep their land from being developed, [H.128](#) proposes to exempt from Act 250 any us of less than one acre for an accessory on-farm business (such as a farmstand or agritourism) or forest products business.

ACT 76: HISTORIC SUPPORT FOR CHILD CARE AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Last year, the legislature passed [Act 76](#)—a long-term investment in our child care and early learning system that will provide access to affordable, quality child care and early learning for thousands of young Vermonters and help make Vermont more affordable for families. Act 76 took effect in July, and we're already seeing signs of progress across the state. Child care programs in every county have increased staff compensation and benefits, improved and expanded their programs, and created new child care slots. Next month, and again in October, the state will expand eligibility for child care tuition assistance for families. By the end of 2024, more than 7,000 additional children and their families will be eligible for free or reduced tuition rates.

BUILDING A BALANCED BUDGET

Vermont's economy continues to outperform expectations. As we build next year's budget, however, we will not have pandemic federal funds to rely on as we have in recent years, even as we're still trying to help Vermonters impacted in 2023 by climate-related severe weather events.

The legislature's review of the administration's proposed budget indicates underfunded and understaffed state agencies that often can't provide the services Vermonters need, with IT systems so outdated they make it hard for employees to do their jobs. In several cases, such as the Summer EBT program for children, we're leaving millions of federal dollars on the table because we have not invested in core systems that would make us eligible to access those dollars.

Despite the challenges, we should not lose sight of some significant successes. Vermont is on track to bring high-speed internet access to all corners of the state, with Bennington County leading the way. Flood damage in July and December was less severe than it might have been due to previous investments in resilience. New childcare slots are opening across the state, the result of last year's historic legislation (see related article).

The House budget will make investments to enhance the stability and effectiveness of state government, while making sure we fund strategic priorities like flood recovery, housing, public safety and climate resilience. Our goal is to create a budget that meets the needs of Vermonters, at a cost they can afford.

Education Funding & Property Taxes

While the sales tax revenues directed to the Education Fund have also been strong, school districts around Vermont have budgeted for significant spending increases next year that will raise education property taxes. There are at least two main reasons for this: contracted salaries and benefits for teachers and staff are expected to rise dramatically (for example, health insurance premiums are up about 16 percent); and federal pandemic funding will be ending this year, while the mental health and other impacts of the pandemic on students have not come to an end.

The legislature is considering immediate remedies to address this year's property tax rates, including possible new revenue sources for the Education Fund, while also looking at long-term changes to the funding system, such as higher tax rates on second homes and more support for school construction.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Rep. David Durfee
Chair, House Committee on Agriculture,
Food Resiliency & Forestry
DDurfee@leg.state.vt.us
802.491-7832 (cell)
durfeeforvermont.com

PUBLIC SAFETY & THE COURT BACKLOG

The threat of clear and speedy consequences is one of the most effective deterrents for any criminal activity. While Vermont is ranked as one of the safest states in the country, the rise in opioid use and several high profile cases have drawn attention to the persistent backlog in our criminal justice system and lengthy delays between arrests and trials.

After nearly a year, the administration has recently filled a number of judicial vacancies, which will begin to address the backlog. To fully support the system, however, we will need additional funding to add prosecutors, public defenders, victim advocates, and restorative justice providers—funding that is not in the governor’s budget proposal. This support is necessary to enable cases to be heard in a timely fashion so that individuals are being held accountable for their actions as soon as possible.

The House has also passed [H.780](#), which makes changes to the judicial nominating process. The way it works now is that a nonpartisan Judicial Nominating Board (made up of legislators, members of the Vermont Bar, and people appointed by the governor) sends nominations for judicial openings to the governor. The governor will continue to make appointments from the list of nominees provided by the Judicial Nominating Board, but will need to do so in a more timely way.

The House is also working on bills that address retail and motor vehicle theft.

UPDATING THE RENEWABLE ENERGY STANDARD

Renewable Energy Standard, an energy policy passed in 2015, put Vermont’s electric utilities on the path to cleaner electricity from renewable sources like hydro, solar and wind. Since then, the state has committed to transitioning away from fossil fuels, joining the global call to action to reduce carbon emissions and protect our future. Now, with historic federal funding available for clean energy, Vermont is set to make major progress over the next decade.

[H.289](#) reflects an unusual collaboration among Vermont’s electric utilities and environmental groups to bring more renewable energy into our grid faster. The updated Renewable Energy Standard raises electric utility requirements for renewable energy to 100 percent by 2030 for most utilities, including Green Mountain Power, with a longer timeframe (2035) for smaller, rural utilities. The bill doubles the amount of new renewable energy built in the state, bringing good-paying clean energy jobs and better protection from rising fossil fuel energy prices.

To make sure all Vermonters have access to the benefits of renewable energy, the bill also includes a study on current and needed programs for affordable housing developments and customers with lower incomes.

CONSUMER DATA PRIVACY

Every day we disclose, intentionally or not, a tremendous amount of personal information. Beyond what we share or “like” on social media, search engines, cell phones, health trackers, retailers and other “data brokers” collect not just our names, addresses, and Social Security numbers, but also our shopping habits, blood pressure, sleep quality, fingerprints, travel routes and the places we visit, who our friends are and their interests, and more. This personal and biometric data is sold by—and sometimes stolen from—these data brokers without our knowledge or permission.

Congress has failed to act on this issue, so 14 states have passed legislation to protect consumer privacy, our personal identification, and most importantly our children’s data. Another 10 states, including Vermont, are working on data privacy bills. Building on the work done in states across the country, like Connecticut and California, the House is creating [H.121](#)—a data privacy bill that works for Vermont and aligns with other states in our region.

PROTECTING POLLINATORS

Neonicotinoids are insecticides introduced in the 1990s that have proven to be highly toxic to bees and other pollinators. Neonics, as they’re called, are intended to prevent crop damage in a wide variety of grains, vegetables, fruits and turf grass, either by spraying or by coating seeds with the insecticide before planting. The residue from treated seeds can make its way into ground and surface water, and after germinating the plants can contain toxic levels of neonics in their leaves and pollen. This leads to increased risks to birds, bees, and other insects, even at the 1-part-per-billion level. Neonics are also used on golf courses to keep grubs at bay and the greens and fairways pristine. Extensive research indicates no significant crop yield loss when substituting untreated seeds.

H. 706 would ultimately ban the use of neonic-treated seeds and most other applications. Quebec banned neonics in 2019, and New York State will begin phasing them out in 2027. By following the lead of our larger neighbor to the west, farmers should have access to a full complement of untreated seed varieties when the ban takes effect in Vermont. The bill has been voted out of committee and will come before the full House later this month.

2024 LEGISLATIVE DIGEST

So far this session, I have supported legislation to:

- ✓ Adopt the Social Work and Occupational Therapy Licensure Compacts
- ✓ Support the Vermont Veterans Home
- ✓ Speed up judicial appointments
- ✓ Loosen regulations on small poultry farmers
- ✓ Increase penalties for timber theft
- ✓ Expand abuse prevention orders
- ✓ Facilitate the continued use of telemedicine
- ✓ Make it easier for the homeless to apply for assistance

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.