

—Slug:.....COMM-0846.bratt.Leve_preview
—Contributor.....Joyce Marcel
—Contributor email.....joyrand@sover.net
—For section.....News
—Format.....News - byline and dateline
—Dateline.....Brattleboro
—Article Number:.....42829

Notes from editor (not for publication):

Let the games begin! This should be an interesting ride. (Grab the popcorn.)

I'm guessing most or all comments came in via email. I integrated some of the last chunks that seemed to fall randomly at the end. I did paraphrase here and there where I got the no-human-being-would-actually-say-that-out-loud vibe. :)

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

#####BEGIN HED#####

¹ Lawmakers anticipate a complex, contentious session

#####END HED#####

#####BEGIN SUBHED#####

² Legislators return to Montpelier in January amid property
³ tax pressures, federal funding uncertainty, a polarized political
⁴ climate, and a host of unresolved issues — like education reform

#####END SUBHED#####

⁵ TEXT BODY:

#####BEGIN TEXT#####

6 The second half of the Vermont Legislature's 2025-26
7 biennium begins on Jan. 6, and it could be a hard-knocks
8 session.

9 Many key issues — education funding, housing, health
10 care, affordability, transportation, prisons — have not been fully
11 dealt with. Some, like the homelessness bill, were vetoed by Gov.
12 Phil Scott in the last session. The continued uncertainty coming
13 from the federal government will put a lot of pressure on the state
14 budget.

15 Add to that an upcoming election, and this session looks
16 especially complex.

17 "Each year provides new and unique challenges,
18 especially given our current federal situation," said Sen. Nader
19 Hashim, D-Windham. "This year will be no different."

20 Rep. Ian Goodnow (D-Windham-9) puts it more bluntly.

21 "Vermont relies on federal support and funding"
22 Goodnow said. "The Legislature will have to navigate an
23 incredibly contentious environment while advocating for the
24 values that Vermonters believe in."

25 Given the frequency in which our federal government
26 likes to make life more challenging for most people, it is difficult
27 to predict what new issues may arise over the coming months.
28 However, constituents who've reached out to me have made it
29 clear that affordability, health care, protecting migrant
30 communities, and education are at the forefront of their
31 concerns."

32 Rep. Mike Mrowicki (D-Windham-4) said the Legislature
33 faces some daunting challenges.

34 "The challenges start with fending off the damage from
35 the current president to our economy, especially regarding
36 Canada, and our sense of safety and well-being," Mrowicki said.

37 "Costs continue to rise for basics like food, shelter, and
38 health care. Coffee and beef keep going up. Rent and mortgages,
39 as well. Health insurance is starting to feel like a luxury item

40 straining budgets at home, work, and for schools and government
41 alike," he continued.

42 All of these drivers of inflation, Mrowicki said, "add to
43 what most obviously stares Vermonters in the face: their property
44 taxes. But we are committed to do what we did last year; working
45 together with the administration to get those final tax numbers
46 down."

47 Rep. Chris Morrow (D-Windham-Windsor-Bennington)
48 believes new thinking is needed in state government. To that end,
49 he is working on starting a new Caucus for Vermont's Economy.

50 "Why is this needed?" Morrow asked. "Because
51 Montpelier is stuck in outmoded thinking. Binary assessments
52 instead of systemic viewpoints. Old, entrenched ideas instead of
53 creative possibilities. Entrenchment instead of leadership."

54 Vermont faces deep overlapping challenges in housing,
55 health care, education, workforce, climate change impacts, and
56 demographics, Morrow said.

57 "For too many Vermonters at too many stages of life, it's
58 simply too hard to build a good life and provide for their
59 families," Morrow said. "We believe every Vermonter deserves
60 the chance to flourish — to live a fulfilling life, care for their
61 family, connect with their community, and contribute to a
62 thriving state."

63 He described the new caucus as "a nonpartisan group
64 committed to advancing policies that strengthen Vermont's
65 economy and the well-being of its people."

66 The legislators will "meet regularly to build coalitions,
67 provide a public forum, generate ideas, set priorities and deepen
68 lawmakers' understanding of complex problems," he said.

69 The caucus will focus on prosperity, Morrow said. It will
70 "be holistic" and recognize that many problems are
71 interconnected. It will also "adopt a customer-service mentality,"
72 in the belief that government can learn from good business
73 practices.

74 "With the proper leadership, creativity, and openness we
75 can optimize state government for this era of uncertainty,"
76 Morrow said.

77 Similarly, many Windham County legislators emphasized
78 the need to keep focused on Vermonters and basic Vermont
79 needs.

80 "A weaker economy and the loss of revenue from the
81 federal government, along with the growing cost of health care,
82 groceries and fuel, are making it harder for Vermonters to make
83 ends meet," said Rep. Emily Long (Windham-5).

84 "This is especially true for our most vulnerable citizens,"
85 she said. "We will have to be creative in our efforts to fill funding
86 gaps and prioritize our limited resources."

87 The Legislature will have to navigate an increasingly
88 contentious environment while advocating for the values that
89 Vermonters believe in, said Goodnow. Protecting the vulnerable,
90 like the LGBTQIA community, older persons, and prisoners may
91 even become dangerous, he noted.

92 "It will take courage and a willingness to risk retaliation
93 from the federal administration," Goodnow said. "I believe this
94 Legislature is willing and ready to do that work."

95 In considering protections for vulnerable Vermonters,
96 Rep. Mollie Burke (D-Windham-8), who is going into her 18th
97 year as a representative, pointed to Vermont's Fair and Impartial
98 Policing Policy, which was passed a number of years ago.

99 "This limits local police involvement in immigration
100 enforcement," Burke said. "I believe we will be strengthening this
101 policy."

102 She also praised the work of state Attorney General
103 Charity R. Clark, who has been active in suing the Trump
104 administration over "legal transgressions," as well as "some good
105 judges who have been involved in protecting civil rights."

106 "However, we all need to be engaged in opposing any
107 unlawful policies and actions, and in standing up for vulnerable
108 citizens," Burke asserted.

109

Education reform

110 Conflicts with the governor are certainly a possibility,
111 especially in education funding reform. Last year, Scott proposed
112 the Transformative Education Plan, which called for revising the
113 state's educational funding formula, creating a single statewide
114 education property tax rate, and reducing the number of regional
115 school districts from more than 90 to just five.

116 In response, a legislative committee — the School
117 Redistricting Task Force — met over the summer to study the
118 issue of mergers. The committee's report emphasized regional
119 cooperation, not mergers, bypassing findings that were consistent
120 with the governor's proposal.

121 "The committee that was set up to explore this option
122 decided that there may be better ways to achieve good results,"
123 said Burke.

124 She views this impasse as a potential source of conflict
125 with Scott, who "believes that his plan for mandatory
126 consolidation is the only way to do this."

127 "We need to figure out a way to address the cost of
128 public education while also not sacrificing quality," Burke said.
129 "This promises to be a very difficult dance to perform."

130 Sen. Wendy Harrison (D-Windham), who served on the
131 redistricting task force, voted in favor of the report and supports
132 the recommendations that are at odds with the governor's
133 roadmap.

134 But last year's education bill "includes adding a new
135 category to our property types for residential homes that are not a
136 primary residence or a year-round rental, essentially 'second
137 homes,'" she said. "I support this change regardless of how the
138 Legislature responds to the Task Force Recommendations."

139 Long serves on the House Committee on Education,
140 whose first order of business will be to review the task force's
141 report with its "great deal of new and important data" and
142 recommendations.

143 "I have been working on education issues for more than
144 three decades and I have witnessed many attempts at education
145 transformation over the years," she said. "The proposals begin
146 using the same assumptions and end up following similar paths,
147 but they rarely achieve our desired long-term goals. I believe we
148 need a new approach."

149 It is clear to Long that Vermonters' commitment to public
150 education remains unwavering.

151 "The task force report has given us a unique opportunity
152 to move away from long-held, outdated assumptions and look
153 critically at the true cost drivers before forcing unsubstantiated
154 change on communities and our education system, which is
155 already under considerable stress," Long said.

156 She hopes that "the governor, his administration and
157 legislative leadership will hear the voices of Vermonters who are
158 asking us to collaborate with them and use accurate data to
159 initiate positive change, especially in our rural regions where
160 scale cannot be reached without significant negative impacts on
161 students, families and the rural communities they live in."

162 "Only then will we be able meet our goals to strengthen
163 our public education system, lower costs and stabilize tax rates,"
164 she said.

165 Burke saw other possible conflicts with the governor.

166 When Democrats had a supermajority — that is, if
167 lawmakers vote along party lines, they can override a veto with a
168 two-thirds majority — "we perhaps had more of a difficult
169 relationship because we could totally ignore the wishes of the
170 governor," she said.

171 She reflected on the special session in 2024 when the
172 House and the Senate overrode six of Scott's vetoes in one day.

173 "One important veto that we overrode was the measure
174 to impose a small payroll tax to help with the child care issue,"
175 Burke said. "The governor vetoed that bill because it was a tax,
176 and he is opposed to raising any tax — although [electric vehicle]
177 drivers are now paying much higher registration fees."

178 As the result of that law, "child care workers are
179 receiving higher pay, which has been notoriously low, and more
180 families are eligible for subsidies to help pay for child care,
181 another economic benefit."

182 But that sort of veto can't happen now without some
183 Republicans and independents crossing the aisle.

184 "So I think that the conflicts will be there and we will
185 have to hope to come to some compromises, instead of just
186 accepting all of what the governor wants," Burke said.

187 **New legislation**

188 Many Windham County legislators are sponsoring new
189 bills on subjects they care deeply about. Harrison has come up
190 with two education funding bills based on her work on the task
191 force.

192 "I saw the need for more transparency in the very
193 complicated system that pays for our schools," Harrison said.

194 Her first bill would require that independent (private)
195 schools "meet specific requirements in order to be approved as
196 eligible to receive public tuition," she said.

197 "Second, I'm sponsoring a bill that states that school
198 district budgets show the names of schools the district pays
199 tuition to, the number of students tuitioned to each school, and
200 the amount of tuition paid to each school," Harrison said.

201 While parents and alumni are effective proponents of the
202 independent schools, Harrison said she has heard much more
203 and longer-lasting support for public schools.

204 "It doesn't need to be one or the other," she said. "There
205 are ways to support both, but we need to be aware of how
206 financial support for independent schools can increase property
207 taxes and weaken our public schools."

208 Harrison is also co-sponsoring a bill that prohibits
209 corporations from donating to political campaigns or
210 organizations.

211 The bill, similar to one that has become law in Montana,
212 "is based on each state's authority to define the scope of
213 corporations that do business within that state," Harrison said.
214 "Our bill strikes at the overall problem in our country with the
215 imbalance of power (money) and the harm that the imbalance is
216 causing. We've come close to enacting legislation in Vermont that
217 addresses this imbalance through our tax code, and I'm ready to
218 support legislation on that front, too."

219 Of special interest to Windham County, Harrison and
220 Hashim are introducing a bill to authorize a pilot program for
221 regionalizing law enforcement services by the Windham County
222 Sheriff's Office, as envisioned by Sheriff Mark Anderson, who has
223 hosted multiple public information sessions to make his case.

224 "Many of our towns are interested in exploring the
225 concept," Harrison said.

226 The bill would allow a temporary governance council to
227 be established in 2026, and it would disband in 2031 unless the
228 Legislature keeps it alive.

229 The council would develop a reasonable level of
230 policing service for towns who choose to participate in the pilot
231 and a workable method to evaluate and pay for these services.

232 "Participation would be voluntary; no town would be
233 required to participate," Harrison said.

234 Hashim's priorities, "generally speaking, are geared
235 toward my role as chair of Senate Judiciary," he said. "I will also
236 be supporting policy changes that will increase affordability,
237 housing, health care, and equitable education opportunities."

238 He plans to introduce several new bills that are "related
239 to protecting migrant communities and improving how our
240 judiciary operates," he said. "For example, one of the bills will
241 require law enforcement be identifiable while also prohibiting
242 them from wearing masks, except under narrow exceptions, like
243 extreme cold weather."

244 Mrowicki is a House sponsor of this bill.

245 "Seeing armed hordes of masked agents prowling our
246 streets is something Americans are not, and will never get, used
247 to," Mrowicki said. "Having them masked amplifies this
248 problem."

249 He pointed out that "judges, prosecutors, social workers,
250 child protection workers all work with dangerous individuals
251 who have targeted them [...] because of their work and, yet,
252 [they] do not wear masks," he said. "It's un-American, and we're
253 holding this action up for public scrutiny."

254 Hashim will also be introducing a bill "that will update
255 our speedy trial laws, which have not been updated in quite
256 some time," he said.

257 "I will also guide Prop. 4, the Equal Rights Amendment,
258 through the second phase of the constitutional amendment
259 process," he added.

260 Affected by the recent police shooting in Putney of a
261 mentally ill individual in crisis, Rep. Michelle Bos-Lun (D-
262 Windham-3) is proposing a new bill that, among other measures,
263 will requiring police officers to complete 15 additional hours of
264 training in mental health crisis management as part of the
265 Vermont Criminal Justice Council's law enforcement officer
266 certification and training requirements.

267 "This bill proposes to treat victims of officer-involved
268 shootings as crime victims with greater access to victims' services
269 and compensation," says a draft copy of the legislation.

270 "This bill further proposes to authorize the [Vermont]
271 Center for Crime Victims Services to hire independent victim
272 guardians to advocate for victims and coordinate with the
273 Department of State's Attorneys and Sheriffs."

274 In addition to the additional training requirements, the
275 draft bill "proposes to incorporate mental health crisis de-
276 escalation techniques into the Vermont Criminal Justice Council's
277 use of force policy."

278 The bill was drafted with input from various stakeholders,
279 including Hashim and Rep. Leslie Goldman (D-Windham-3).

280

Transportation issues

281 Burke is working with a group of colleagues from the
282 Transportation Committee on an omnibus transportation bill that
283 includes a number of measures particularly supportive of transit
284 and bicycle/pedestrian programs.

285 "We are also advocating for continued funding of
286 programs that provide grants for innovative transit initiatives and
287 improved transportation amenities for towns, such as the Better
288 Connections program and the Downtown Transportation Fund,"
289 Burke said.

290 The program provides technical assistance and funds to
291 local communities to help them with planning efforts to increase
292 public transit and "improve land use, water quality, public health,
293 and economic vitality."

294 In a time of reduced federal funding, Burke said she
295 believes it is important to keep communities vital. These two
296 programs are important tools in that process, she believes.

297 She's also looking to reinstate funding for MileageSmart,
298 "our vehicle incentive program to help low-income Vermonters
299 purchase a used fuel efficient car," Burke said. "This program was
300 successful in helping reduce transportation costs for persons with
301 very low incomes."

302 And paired with purchase incentives for new vehicles,
303 our EV sales increased, helping to meet our statutory carbon
304 reduction goals.

305 Burke noted that these projects were funded by the
306 federal 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), signed
307 by then-President Biden, which included "a number of measures
308 to help reduce climate pollution" that have been eliminated by
309 the Trump administration.

310 She said she was not hopeful about finding funding
311 opportunities for MileageSmart and other programs that had
312 received federal dollars, "but I want to put the issue on the table.
313 And I want to put the issue of climate on the table as well."

314 It has been “disheartening” to run out of money for
315 programs that not only address climate pollution, but also
316 improve air quality and public health while lowering
317 transportation costs for citizens, Burke said.

318 “And it’s distressing to see how all mention of climate,
319 and climate mitigation, has literally been scrubbed from the
320 federal vocabulary,” she said. “Just at the time when the effects of
321 climate change are ever-more present, posing great dangers to
322 our economy and way of life, and to our transportation
323 infrastructure.”

324 She pointed to the flooding in Vermont in 2023 and
325 2024.

326 “I entered the Legislature 17 years ago with the desire to
327 help cut carbon emissions from the transportation sector,” Burke
328 said. “There have been some successes, but absent a federal
329 partner, significant work will be difficult.”

330 For Mrowicki, artificial intelligence (A.I.) also raises
331 many concerns.

332 “I’m proposing a bill similar to the Illinois ‘[Wellness and](#)
333 [Oversight for Psychological Resources Act](#),’” Mrowicki said. “This
334 prohibits A.I. from independently providing therapy or making
335 therapeutic decisions.”

336 Suicides attributed to A.I.-provided therapy are at the
337 root of the need for this bill, he said.

338 Mrowicki is also looking at the drug problem, which
339 appears to be “taking a turn for the worse.”

340 He cited testimony from the Vermont Health
341 Commissioner Rick Hildebrant, M.D., that alerted lawmakers
342 about a “shift in drug use from opioids to methamphetamine and
343 cocaine.”

344 “This amplifies the current problem, in that there is not a
345 remedy for overdoses [for those two drugs] as there is for opioid
346 use [Narcan, also known as naloxone], and treatment options are
347 not as available,” he said.

348 "We continue to need more mental health options, and it
349 may be time we look at our whole system of how these services
350 get to Vermonters," Mrowicki said.

351 Goodnow said he is working on two new bills. One,
352 which is in the draft phase, "relates to allowing specific instances
353 where landlords may 'no-trespass' problematic non-tenant
354 visitors at multi-unit properties," he said.

355 "This issue was brought to my attention by multiple
356 housing partners in Brattleboro, including the Windham &
357 Windsor Housing Trust," he said. "It is my understanding that this
358 issue is harming both tenants and landlords, and the Legislature
359 has the opportunity to better protect both by improving the law in
360 this area."

361 The second bill aims to strengthen voter protection rights
362 and prevent voter intimidation and interference at the polls.

363 "In our current political climate, we need to ensure our
364 voters' faith in our elections," Goodnow said. "I am working with
365 the Vermont Secretary of State [Sarah Copeland-Hanzas] on this
366 and to ensure we are protecting and strengthening our voter
367 protection laws in Vermont."

368 **Hospital concerns**

369 Windham County's legislative delegation is also keeping
370 a close eye on the financially troubled Brattleboro Memorial
371 Hospital and will do everything in its power to keep it open and
372 serving patients, Mrowicki said.

373 "Two of the biggest drivers of inflation and rising costs
374 are housing and health care," he said. "Without federal help,
375 there's only so much Vermont can do, but we will continue to
376 look into what we can do to increase access and control costs."

377 He said that legislators met with Brattleboro Hospital
378 leadership last week and "are impressed with the steps they are
379 taking to get things back on track."

380 "Your local delegation is clear that we will do whatever
381 we can to make sure, BMH stays viable and serving our

382 community as a foundational community institution," Mrowicki
383 said.

384 **Getting in touch**

385 Burke wants her constituents to know that she still loves
386 her job.

387 "I want people to know that I am looking forward to
388 getting back to Montpelier and working on issues that help
389 people in their lives, whether it's to support a special policy or
390 program, or some other issue," she said.

391 "The favorite part of my job is when I can see the
392 difference a particular policy will make for constituents, and vote
393 on that policy," Burke said.

394 She also said that she loves helping constituents by
395 connecting them to people in state government who can solve
396 problems — "perhaps a [Department of Motor Vehicles] issue, or
397 a tax issue, or a problem with timely unemployment payments."

398 Goodnow, going into the second year of his first term,
399 wants the constituents of Windham County to know that they
400 have a strong delegation of representatives and senators speaking
401 for them in Montpelier.

402 "Please reach out to us by email or phone with questions
403 or concerns about what is happening," he said.

#####END TEXT#####

BIO/COATTAIL:

#####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL#####

404 Vermonters can contact their state representatives and
405 senators at legislature.vermont.gov/people/search/2026.

#####END BIO/COATTAIL#####

LAST ISSUE IN WHICH THIS FILE CAN BE RUN:

#####BEGIN MAXISSUE#####

406 0

#####END MAXISSUE#####

LINKS:

#####BEGIN LINKS#####

407

#####END LINKS#####

VIDEO:

#####BEGIN VIDEO#####

408

#####END VIDEO#####

LOGLINE (SOCIAL MEDIA):

#####BEGIN LOGLINE#####

409

#####END LOGLINE#####