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Notes from editor (not for publication):

Thanks, Chip. —J

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

One well-intentioned decision at a time

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

Vermont's affordability crisis wasn't created by any single
policy. It was created by years of not giving equal weight to how
much all of them would cost.

####END SUBHED####

TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

MOST OF US live in Vermont on purpose. We chose the
hills and villages, Town Meeting, and neighbors who show up
with a chainsaw after an ice storm. We stay because this place is
worth it.

That's why the latest University of New Hampshire Green
Mountain State Poll should concern every Vermonter.

12 In the poll, 86% of respondents say Vermont is not very
13 or not at all affordable, and 42% say they are likely to leave
14 within five years. Among Vermonters ages 18 to 34, nearly two-
15 thirds say they are likely to leave.

16 Those numbers didn't happen overnight.

17 They weren't caused by one tax increase or one budget.

18 They happened one well-intentioned decision after
19 another.

20 * * *

21 FOR MUCH OF the past decade, Vermont politics too often
22 became Legislature versus governor, when it should have been
23 Legislature and governor working together for Vermont.

24 Democratic and Progressive lawmakers held
25 commanding majorities for much of that time. They had every
26 right to advance their agenda, and when they gained a veto-proof
27 supermajority, they had every constitutional right to override Gov.
28 Phil Scott's vetoes.

29 They did exactly that.

30 But during the years of the Democratic-Progressive
31 supermajority, a governor's veto too often marked the end of
32 negotiations rather than the beginning of compromise.

33 The question isn't whether every override was wrong.

34 The question is: Did legislators lose sight of what all of
35 those decisions would cost when added together?

36 * * *

37 GOOD INTENTIONS are easy.

38 Prioritizing among them is the hard part.

39 For much of the past decade, Vermont's Democratic and
40 Progressive majorities tried to tackle nearly every important
41 problem facing the state.

42 Child care.

43 Education.

44 Housing.

45 Climate policy.

46 Paid leave.

Health care.

Most of those goals deserved attention. Most had sincere supporters.

But governing isn't just about saying yes to worthwhile ideas. It's also about deciding which ones can be afforded today, which ones should wait, and which ones require compromise.

Government cannot be all things to everyone, especially in a small state with a limited tax base, an aging population, and relatively slow economic growth.

Every family understands this. You can have a list full of worthwhile expenses. Eventually, you have to decide which ones come first and which ones have to wait.

Government faces the same reality.

Again and again, Gov. Scott maintained that Vermont was taking on more taxes, mandates, and spending than taxpayers could reasonably support. Sometimes he was right. Sometimes reasonable people disagreed.

But during the years of a veto-proof Legislature, those disagreements rarely ended in compromise.

Instead, lawmakers repeatedly overrode him.

In 2020, they overrode his vetoes of the minimum-wage increase and the Global Warming Solutions Act. In 2023, they overrode his veto of the childcare bill and its new payroll tax. In 2024, they overrode six vetoes in a single day, including the education property-tax bill that resulted in an average projected 13.8% increase in school property taxes and legislation expanding Vermont's renewable-energy requirements.

Viewed one at a time, each decision can be debated on its own merits.

Viewed together, they tell a different story.

Taxpayers don't experience government one bill at a time.

They experience the cumulative cost of all of them.

* * *

81 LOOKING BACK, it's difficult to escape the conclusion that
82 Vermont's affordability crisis wasn't created by any single policy.
83 It was created by years of adding one more commitment, one
84 more mandate, one more tax, and one more program without
85 giving equal weight to what all of those decisions would mean
86 when the bill finally came due.

87 There's an old lesson every Vermont sugarmaker
88 understands.

89 One tap won't hurt a healthy maple tree.

90 Keep drilling more taps into the same tree, and
91 eventually you weaken it.

92 For years, Montpelier kept tapping the same taxpayers.

93 One more tax.

94 One more mandate.

95 One more fee.

96 One more program.

97 Eventually, even generous Vermonters begin asking
98 whether the tree can support another tap.

99 The latest UNH poll suggests many of them have reached
100 that point.

101 * * *

102 THE ENCOURAGING NEWS is that this isn't permanent.

103 Affordability doesn't require abandoning Vermont's
104 values. It requires something the Legislature has too-often lacked
105 over the past decade: the discipline to set priorities, the
106 willingness to compromise, and the recognition that Vermont
107 works best when the governor and Legislature work together
108 instead of around one another.

109 That's where rebuilding affordability should begin.

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

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

110 **CHIP CARTER**, a retired television anchor, moved in
111 2016 to Guilford, where he volunteers with a number of
112 community organizations and serves on the Selectboard.

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

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