

# 2025 TOWN MEETING REPORT

REP. MONIQUE PRIESTLEY • ORANGE-2: BRADFORD, FAIRLEE & WEST FAIRLEE



## HOW TO CONTACT ME

Representative Monique Priestley • House Commerce & Economic Development (Clerk)  
Joint Information Technology Oversight Committee • Rural Caucus (Co-Chair)  
NCSL Task Force on Artificial Intelligence, Cybersecurity & Privacy  
Legislative Trustee for University of Vermont

\*\*\*

Email: [mpriestley@leg.state.vt.us](mailto:mpriestley@leg.state.vt.us) • Website: [priestleyvt.com](http://priestleyvt.com) • FB/IG: @priestleyvermont

To see my voting record, review bills, and watch floor debates and committee hearings,  
visit: [legislature.vermont.gov](http://legislature.vermont.gov)



I am excited to serve you as the representative for the Orange-2 district, encompassing Bradford, Fairlee, and West Fairlee, in the Vermont House of Representatives. First elected in November 2022 as part of the largest new legislator cohort in Vermont history, I began my first term on January 4, 2023, and I am honored to have begun my second term on January 8, 2025, following my re-election. Thank you for your support. It is an honor and a privilege to serve you.

I am deeply committed to serving my constituents – you are my top priority – and addressing the key issues facing Vermont. I serve as Clerk of the House Committee on Commerce and Economic Development, and I am also a member of the Joint Information Technology Oversight Committee. My legislative work is further informed by my participation in several national organizations: the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) Task Force on Artificial Intelligence, Cybersecurity & Privacy; the NCSL Committee on Technology & Communications; and the NCSL Committee on Labor & Economic Development. I was also elected as a Legislative Trustee for the University of Vermont.

Within the Vermont Legislature, I am actively involved in several caucuses, demonstrating my commitment to a range of important issues. I serve as Co-Chair of the Rural Caucus and participate in the Future Caucus, Climate Caucus, and Labor Caucus.

My dedication and leadership have been recognized through several awards, including the 2024 Council of State Governments Top 20 Under 40 Award, the 2024 Electronic Privacy Information Center National Champion of Freedom Award, and the 2023 Legislative Service Award (Rural Caucus). I have also participated in leadership development programs, including the 2024 Council of State Governments Eastern Leadership Academy, the 2024 Future Caucus Policy Innovation Lab Fellowship (focused on Strengthening Democracy), and the 2023 NCSL Emerging Leaders Leadership Training Program.

I am focused on making a positive impact in several key areas where there are technical knowledge gaps that require a deep dive into technology policy that affects the lives of everyday Vermonters, primarily consumer protection, data privacy, algorithmic discrimination, and automated decision making systems. You can find a list of the bills I am leading as well as my most recent op-ed at the end of this report. To learn more please visit [priestleyvt.com](http://priestleyvt.com). I value your input and encourage you to reach out with any questions or concerns.

## 2025 LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

As the 2025 Vermont legislative biennium begins to pick up pace, we remain steadfast in our commitment to making Vermont more affordable for our communities. So far, our work has been guided by sound investments in the Budget Adjustment Act and thoughtful policy conversations in Committees that work to address the pressing challenges facing our state—rising healthcare costs, workforce shortages, unsustainable property tax increases, the cost of a quality public education system, and scarcity in affordable housing. These are big issues that add additional financial pressures on working families, and I want you to know that I have heard your concerns loud and clear.

Solving these challenges will take all of us coming to the table with a willingness to do the hard work that Vermonters have asked us to do, and we are committed to delivering thoughtful and sustainable solutions. Right now, we are developing policies that strengthen our healthcare system and ensure fair wages for care providers. We are investing in sustainable housing solutions that include smart development, while also supporting our most vulnerable neighbors. We are taking bold steps to reform our public education funding system that won't jeopardize the quality of education that kids deserve.

At the heart of this progress is the question: "How do we provide tax relief for working Vermonters and create a fairer, more sustainable economy?" We know that building a future where every Vermonter can thrive will take time, but I can assure you that I will continue to advocate for just that. Through collaboration, innovation, and a deep commitment to cost-effective solutions, we are laying the foundation for a stronger, more prosperous Vermont for generations to come.

As always, it is an honor to serve as your State Representative, and I am so grateful for the continued feedback I receive from you all. It makes a real difference and informs how I make decisions with your concerns in mind. Please continue to reach out with your thoughts and questions – we can't do this work without you..

## Agriculture, Food Resiliency and Forestry

### Proposed Land Use Legislation

The House Agriculture, Food Resiliency, and Forestry Committee is considering a comprehensive land use

bill that combines three proposals related to the Current Use Value Appraisal Program. These proposals aim to reduce costs for farmers, incentivize the development of affordable housing, and generate additional revenue from lands that are “posted” (marked against hunting, fishing, or trapping).

### **Enrollment of Posted Land in Current Use**

H.291 proposes that land posted against hunting, fishing, or trapping would pay a higher tax rate than other agricultural or managed forestland enrolled in the Use Value Appraisal Program. Specifically, the Current Use Advisory Board would recommend a tax rate for posted land equal to 25 percent of the difference between the parcel’s use value and its grand list value (under 10 V.S.A. § 5201). This bill would impact state revenue.

### **Amendments to Use Value Appraisals**

H.273 proposes several changes to the eligibility requirements for the Use Value Appraisal Program:

- A farmer would be eligible for the program if they earn at least 25 percent of their annual gross income from farming.
- The land use change tax rate would be reduced from 10 percent to six percent of the full fair market value of the changed land.
- The definition of a “farmer” eligible for enrollment of agricultural land would be expanded to include individuals who earn at least 25 percent of their income from raising, feeding, or managing equines.

These changes are intended to support young and beginning farmers, as well as homesteaders who may rely on off-farm income.

### **Land Use Change Tax Calculation and Affordable Housing Exemption**

H.134 proposes two key changes:

- It would modify the land use change tax calculation when a portion of a parcel is removed from use value appraisal. The calculation would use proration based on acreage, rather than valuing the removed portion as a separate parcel.
- It would create a new land use change tax exemption for land withdrawn from the program for the development of affordable housing.

### **Universal School Meals**

The committee is a strong advocate for Universal School Meals. Investing in Universal School Meals

means healthier kids, stronger families, thriving farms, and successful schools. No student should have to learn while hungry. Providing meals to all students leads to better focus, improved behavior, and higher academic achievement. Vermont leads the nation in summer meal participation, with 1 million meals served in the summer of 2024. Repealing Act 64 would reverse this progress, harm vulnerable families, and create financial instability for schools and farmers. Vermont must keep its commitment to feeding every student, every school day..

## **Appropriations**

The House Appropriations Committee has been thoroughly reviewing the Governor’s draft budget. This review has involved discussions with state agencies, policy committees, and Vermont citizens through several public hearings. Key needs identified during this process include:

- **Healthcare Provider Reimbursement:** Addressing gaps between Medicaid reimbursement rates and the actual cost of services delivered by mental health and primary care providers, as well as at adult day and long-term care facilities.
- **Court System Backlogs:** Addressing court backlogs, which may require additional legal or judicial staffing.
- **Food Security:** Meeting the increased demand for basic food supports and Meals on Wheels.
- **Affordable Housing:** Expanding access to affordable housing for low- to moderate-income Vermonters.

As in every year, the committee’s goal is to craft a budget that carefully balances addressing immediate and emerging needs, making meaningful investments in long-term priorities (such as maintaining infrastructure and expanding broadband access), and ensuring that state government has the capacity to fulfill its obligations to Vermonters. This year, the budget process is further complicated by two critical factors: the need to reform our education funding system and the potential impact of federal funding cuts.

The committee is working in close collaboration with the Governor, the Treasurer, and the Joint Fiscal Office to consider all options. We will keep you informed of any significant developments. The budget is expected to pass out of committee on March 21st and move on to the Senate.

## Commerce & Economic Development

### Career Technical Education (CTE) Review

The House Committee on Commerce and Economic Development is conducting a thorough review of the Career Technical Education (CTE) component of the Governor's Education Transformation Proposal. This review has included meetings with numerous CTE center leaders, a visit to a Career Technical Center, and an examination of Vermont's CTE governance structures (currently 17 centers with 4 different governance structures). The committee also met with Zoie Saunders, Secretary of the Agency of Education, and her CTE consultants.

The Commerce Committee, in collaboration with the Education Committee, will ultimately make recommendations for improving CTE in Vermont. These recommendations will address, among other things, the optimal number and type of CTE governing entities needed to ensure high-quality student learning, and the crucial relationship between CTE programs and Vermont's other workforce training initiatives.

### Workforce Development

As part of ongoing efforts to enhance Vermont's workforce development system, the House Commerce Committee passed H.34. This bill establishes a clear vision for the Office of Workforce Development and Strategy and its Executive Director. The committee remains committed to positioning Vermont as a national leader in workforce development, leveraging the state's assets to create an exceptional environment for workers.

## Corrections & Institutions

### Supporting a Dynamic and Successful Corrections System

Vermont's correctional system currently houses a relatively stable population of just over 1,400 incarcerated individuals. The Department of Corrections is committed to creating a safe and equitable environment that recognizes the potential in all incarcerated people. The Department strives to support positive change through restorative justice practices, rewarding career opportunities, and meaningful partnerships that help break down systemic barriers to successful reentry into our communities.

A key legislative priority is to support the Department in meeting these needs. We are exploring expanded

educational opportunities within the correctional system. Currently, Community College of Vermont (CCV) offers classes in many of our correctional facilities, providing incarcerated individuals with access to college-level coursework that prepares them for success upon release. CCV also offers courses to correctional officers and their families, supporting career advancement and personal enrichment.

### Crucial Infrastructure: Adjusting Capital Bill

The House Committee on Corrections & Institutions is actively involved in adjusting the two-year, \$127 million Capital Bill. This bill funds crucial infrastructure investments across Vermont, supporting municipalities with projects such as wastewater and water system upgrades, as well as improvements to historic state office buildings. The aim is to bolster public services and stimulate economic growth.

Recognizing the importance of responsible stewardship of public funds, the legislature's goal is to direct resources to projects that best serve the priorities of all Vermonters. For example, the committee has supported funding for the Vermont Rural Fire Protection Task Force's ongoing mission to enhance the safety of rural communities. This includes funding for year-round dry hydrant systems that protect towns in every county from fire hazards. The legislature is also considering essential facility and mechanical upgrades at Vermont State University campuses – an investment in Vermont's future that will benefit all residents for years to come.

## Education

### Commission on the Future of Public Education

The legislature established the Commission on the Future of Public Education through the Yield Bill of 2024. The Commission's charge is to develop recommendations for a statewide vision of Vermont's public education system, ensuring that all students have access to substantially equal educational opportunities within an efficient, sustainable, and stable system. The challenging budget environment of 2024, driven by various cost factors, underscored the need for a modern vision for public education across our state.

The Commission comprises representatives from diverse segments of the education system, including state government, the State Board of Education, the Legislature, school boards, principals, superintendents, teachers, and other education experts. A preliminary report was delivered at the start of the

2025 session. This report addresses long-standing, systemic issues within Vermont's education system, including: the education finance system, education governance, resource allocation, administration, and the overall structure of the system (school buildings, districts, and supervisory unions).

The preliminary report highlighted both the complexity of the task ahead and our shared responsibility to create thoughtful, student-centered change based on reliable data. As Vermonters, we share a responsibility for the education of our youth throughout the state. Fulfilling this responsibility will require collaboration and transformational policy changes, implemented over several years, related to education governance, delivery models, and finance.

### **Supporting High-Quality Public Education**

As we address complex education policy issues this session, the right of Vermont students to a high-quality public education remains our central focus. Our goal is to support students in their career paths by providing a solid educational foundation and fostering a strong sense of connection and contribution to our communities. Schools are vital democratic institutions, where students from all backgrounds can come together, learn, and thrive.

Ensuring equitable access to high-quality educational opportunities is crucial for the success of the next generation of Vermonters. From pre-kindergarten through high school, we must nurture and support all students. We remain committed to providing teachers and school leaders with the necessary educational resources, regardless of geographic location.

Thriving and sustainable public schools are essential for strong communities in all fourteen counties. Together, we can chart a thoughtful and sustainable path forward.

## **Environment**

### **Climate Resiliency**

The House Committee on Environment is focused on ensuring the effective implementation of landmark climate legislation passed in recent years. This includes Act 59, the Community Resiliency and Biodiversity Protection Act, which mandates the permanent conservation of 30% of Vermont by 2030 and 50% by 2050. This conservation effort aims to preserve biodiversity and enable species to adapt to the changing climate by shifting their ranges. The committee is also examining best practices in river corridor restoration, including the role of beavers in

providing natural flood resiliency services for landscapes and communities.

### **Clean Water Regulations**

The House Committee on Environment has been reviewing the state's ongoing investments and regulatory actions to reduce phosphorus pollution in Lake Champlain and Lake Memphremagog, as required by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. This session, the committee is working to address concerns that the 3-acre stormwater rule, implemented to reduce phosphorus from impervious surfaces, is overly burdensome in certain situations. The committee is also exploring options for relocating Vermont's agricultural water quality regulatory program from the Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets to the Agency of Natural Resources, as mandated by the U.S. EPA.

### **Protecting Vermonters from PFAS**

The committee is working on a bill to further reduce PFAS chemical contamination in consumer products and the environment. These "forever chemicals" pose significant human health risks, including cancer, reduced fertility, developmental effects in children, and disruption of hormone and immune systems. This bill builds upon Act 131 (passed in 2024), which banned PFAS compounds in several consumer products. The proposed legislation would expand the list of banned products, encourage industries to eliminate PFAS from both products and manufacturing processes, and continue Vermont's progress in addressing this widespread environmental challenge.

## **Energy & Digital Infrastructure**

### **Government IT Oversight**

The House Energy and Digital Infrastructure Committee is establishing effective oversight of Vermont's state government information technology (IT) systems. The financial scale of these systems is significant: the Agency of Digital Services (ADS) currently projects total IT costs exceeding \$760 million for 53 projects over the next several years. Many agency and department systems are decades old and require urgent replacement.

ADS, established in statute six years ago to coordinate IT projects across the executive branch, has experienced three Secretaries and limited legislative oversight during that time. The current Secretary, Denise Reilly-Hughes, is prioritizing improvements and standardization of IT systems and procurement. She is collaborating with the committee on a bill to

enhance the ADS dashboard, a crucial tool for legislators and Vermonters to monitor the progress of major IT projects and ensure they remain on time and within budget.

### **What's Happening with Clean Heat?**

Significant misinformation circulated last year regarding the legislature's work on energy and climate, particularly concerning the Affordable Heat Act and its proposed clean heat standard. The Public Utility Commission's implementation report, released on January 15, clarified that projected price impacts on heating fuel had been greatly exaggerated. The report estimated an initial increase of approximately 8 cents per gallon, rising to 58 cents after 10 years.

The report also concluded that establishing a "clean heat credit" market, analogous to renewable energy credits in the regional electric sector, is not feasible for Vermont to undertake independently. Consequently, the legislature is not proceeding with the clean heat standard at this time.

The clean heat credit market was intended to generate funds to assist Vermonters, through discounts and incentives, in weatherizing their homes and installing more efficient heating systems. This remains a crucial objective: it not only reduces climate pollution but also enables families to achieve substantial long-term savings on heating bills. This session, we aim to collaborate with the Scott administration to explore alternative strategies for addressing the high upfront costs of these improvements, particularly for the most vulnerable Vermonters.

### **Tracking the Energy Transition**

The House Energy and Digital Infrastructure Committee is developing a bill (H.125) to compile existing data to assess the impact of the energy transition. As society transitions away from fossil fuels, it is crucial to understand how Vermont and its residents are affected. Key questions include: Are weatherization services readily available in all rural areas? Are any regions at risk of becoming dependent on a single fuel supplier? Do communities have sufficient grid capacity to support the adoption of heat pumps, electric vehicles, and distributed solar generation? This proposed annual report will enable us to identify trends and develop policies to ensure that no communities are left behind in the transition.

## **General & Housing**

### **Addressing Vermont's Housing Shortage**

Vermont's housing shortage is a complex issue with multiple contributing factors. The House is actively developing solutions through a collaborative effort involving several key committees: House General and Housing, House Commerce, House Environment, House Energy, and House Government Operations.

### **Key Housing Initiatives**

The omnibus housing bill, along with related legislation, aims to make housing in Vermont more affordable and easier to permit, finance, and construct. Key initiatives include:

- **Funding Affordable Housing:** Providing funding to agencies that support affordable housing options for a wide range of Vermonters. Due to the high cost of materials and labor in Vermont, subsidies are necessary to ensure housing remains affordable for essential workers, such as construction workers, retail workers, nurses, car mechanics, social workers, and teachers. This funding will be provided through budget appropriations to the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board and the Vermont Housing Finance Agency.
- **Financing Infrastructure:** Creating new financing tools to support the development of essential infrastructure for new housing. These tools will help address the costs associated with developing new sewer, water, and septic systems, as well as roads and sidewalks, in a way that keeps housing prices down.
- **Encouraging Density:** Building upon last year's efforts to allow for denser housing and prioritize development near urban and village centers. Current efforts are focused on streamlining the permitting process for local governments.
- **Streamlining Regulations:** Simplifying and accelerating the regulatory process and appeals process for housing development. This includes reducing duplication, shortening the time and cost required for project approvals, and ensuring that any challenges to local housing approvals are based on legitimate issues and are resolved promptly.

## **Government Operations & Military Affairs**

### **Bennington Election Results Affirmed**

In the 2024 election, an error in the checklists in two adjacent districts in Bennington led to about 50 vot-

ers receiving ballots listing the candidates for state representative incorrectly. This error was brought forward after the election and the losing candidate petitioned the state to request a new election. The Vermont state constitution and legal precedent dictates that the courts do not have the authority to decide what to do in the case of a contested election of a member of the House; that authority is with the House itself.

After examining the evidence and taking testimony from a broad range of witnesses, including town clerks, the candidates themselves, and the Secretary of State's office, the House Government Operations and Military Affairs committee on a bipartisan vote of 10-1 moved to recommend to the full House that it affirm the certified election winner and then work on addressing any issues that led to the checklist errors in this year's elections bill. It had become clear throughout the testimony that it would be impossible to recreate all the circumstances of an election that had already occurred and still be fair to the voters and both candidates. Voters have moved in and out since the election and voters had already made their choices known. Campaign funds had been raised and spent. In addition, in the many weeks it would take to carry out the logistics of a new election, the voters and the candidates would remain in limbo about who would be representing them for the remainder of the biennium. The House of Representatives made the decision that seemed the fairest considering all of these circumstances.

### **Strengthening our Elections:**

The House Government Operations and Military Affairs committee has started its work on a bill to strengthen and clarify some of our elections processes in Vermont. The committee is considering proposals for a number of changes, including instituting Rank Choice Voting for presidential primaries; requiring candidates remain affiliated with the one party they declare in the primary through the general election. In addition, the bill proposes to allow members of the military and others who cannot physically return their ballots to return them electronically (to transmit them; \*not\* to vote over the Internet). The bill proposes to require all candidates, both official and write-ins, to earn the same number of signatures to qualify for election. The bill clarifies some campaign finance rules, and requires an audit be done of checklists and district lines to prevent the errors that occurred in the 2024 Bennington 1 and 5 district election. The committee expects to be engaging in robust discussions with many stakeholders about

these proposals over the next few weeks.

### **Increasing Opportunities for Vermont Students**

The House Government Operations and Military Affairs has begun to address the potential redistricting of schools in Vermont in partnership with the Senate Government Operations committee. Responding to the Governor's proposal of much larger school districts, legislative colleagues agree that some increase in district size, based on research and evidence about what is best for students, could help Vermont gain efficiencies and improve education delivery. Questions these committees are asking include how the districts will be structured as government entities; how the elections will be held and how municipalities will be housed in each larger school district. The Secretary of State advised the Government Operations committees that they could decide what criteria would be used for creating new districts while many other decisions remain to be decided by other committees. In increasing district size, there is potential to expand opportunities, especially for high school students, around Vermont, which is exciting and hopeful and both House and Senate committees are eager to start to make progress in this area.

### **Making Government Accountability a Habit**

The House Committee on Government Operations and Military Affairs has been working on a bill—H.67—that would incorporate accountability mechanisms into the legislative process for legislation that has or will affect the entire Vermont population. The bill would create a standing committee of legislators who will choose issues of significant public concern to review and make recommendations about. The goal of this legislation is to systematize government accountability with simple, clear, independent, objective, and fact-based processes rather than rely upon individual legislators or committees to be effective.

## **Health Care**

### **Landscape of Healthcare in Vermont**

The House Committee on Health Care has heard extensive testimony from across Vermont's healthcare system, including private and public organizations, hospitals, advocates, consumers, ratepayers, and insurers. This testimony has revealed that Vermont's healthcare system is currently in a fragile state. Key challenges include major workforce shortages, financial strain on providers, limited access to care, and a growing demand for more acute services. Without prompt and effective action, critical components of

the system are at risk of failing, which would further restrict access to quality care for all Vermonters.

## **Approaches to Policy Reform**

In response to these challenges, the committee is exploring a range of strategies spanning short, medium, and long-term horizons to alleviate pressures and promote sustainability. Current policy discussions and actions are focused on legislation (H.35 and H.96) designed to immediately streamline regulatory oversight, enhance accountability, and improve financial stability. Committee members are also considering mid-term reform efforts to encourage innovation and ensure that Vermont's healthcare system, and its residents, remain financially viable, affordable, and accessible in the coming years.

## **Removing Barriers to Care**

A central reform priority is H.96, a bill that seeks to increase the monetary thresholds required for a Certificate of Need (CON). Current CON requirements can be costly, hinder competition, and delay the expansion of services, the acquisition of new equipment, or necessary investments in infrastructure. By adjusting these monetary thresholds, H.96 aims to strike a balance between appropriate oversight and efficiency, ultimately improving access to care.

Looking ahead, the committee will continue to develop legislation focused on a long-term strategy to address healthcare costs, insurer stability, overall affordability, and access to care. The committee believes that all Vermonters deserve to receive the care they need, when and where they need it, at an affordable price.

## **Human Services**

### **Fair Wages for Home- and Community-Based Care Providers**

Discussions of Vermont's workforce crisis often overlook the significant impact on our most vulnerable neighbors. Without a well-supported and fairly compensated workforce of home- and community-based care providers, many Vermonters will be unable to live at home with the dignity and assistance they need. The House of Representatives has passed H.13, a bill that addresses wage disparities for workers supporting older Vermonters and individuals with disabilities. While progress has been made in raising wages for nursing home staff (the most expensive care option), home- and community-based care workers have not seen comparable improvements. H.13 calls for a rate study to guide efforts toward fairer wages and reim-

bursement for other provider costs, providing crucial support for these essential workers and the individuals they serve.

## **Creating Change to Support Vermonters Experiencing Homelessness**

The COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with Vermont's housing shortage, has significantly exacerbated the already challenging issue of homelessness. While each individual's experience of homelessness is unique, a common thread is that with appropriate support, positive change is possible. Through H.91, the legislature is working to transition away from a reliance on emergency motel vouchers and toward a more comprehensive and sustainable support system. This shift emphasizes personalized support, addressing the underlying causes of homelessness for each individual and offering long-term solutions. The program will include wraparound services, with a particular focus on identifying and providing access to mental health care, addiction treatment, and permanent housing. By understanding the diverse circumstances that lead to homelessness, Vermont aims to create a system that not only provides shelter but also empowers individuals to achieve lasting stability and independence.

## **Judiciary**

### **Establishing Criminal Accountability for Abuse of a Deceased Individual**

In response to a tragic murder case last year in Enosburg, where the perpetrator burned the victim's body, the House Judiciary Committee passed H.41. This bill establishes the act of abusing a deceased person's body as a felony crime, which, surprisingly, was not previously codified in Vermont statute.

The new law prohibits various forms of conduct that constitute abuse of a corpse. Specifically, it establishes a five-year felony for anyone who burns, mutilates, disfigures, dismembers, or destroys a dead human body, with a clear exception for individuals legally authorized to handle deceased bodies, such as medical examiners. The bill also introduces an enhanced penalty if the abuse is committed with the intent to conceal a crime, evade apprehension or prosecution, or involves a sexual act with a deceased human body.

### **Protecting Parental Rights Through Confirmatory Adoption**

Most individuals never have to question the legal validity of their parental rights. However, for those who become parents through assisted reproduction (e.g.,



IVF or sperm donation), this can be a serious concern, particularly outside of Vermont.

While Vermont law recognizes families created through assisted reproduction, other states may not, potentially creating legal challenges when families travel or relocate. To provide an additional layer of legal security for these Vermont parents, the House passed H.98.

Vermont's existing adoption process, designed for traditional adoptions, is understandably extensive. These requirements are not suitable for situations where the adoption's purpose is to confirm existing legal parent-child relationships already recognized under state law. Confirmatory adoption provides adoption decrees that must be recognized in all states, which is essential for safeguarding the best interests and safety of the children involved.

### **Expanding Hate Crime Laws**

The Vermont House passed H.118, expanding the scope of Vermont's hate-crime enhancement statute. This bill now includes hate-motivated crimes targeting third parties and groups based on their actual or perceived membership in a protected category.

Under current law, an individual committing a crime motivated by the victim's membership in a protected category (e.g., race, color, religion, national origin) may face additional penalties. H.118 broadens this statute, allowing prosecutors to apply the enhancement in cases where the crime is motivated by hate towards a protected group, even if the direct victim is not a member of that group. This expansion aims to create a law that more accurately reflects the nature of some hate crimes.

## **Transportation**

### **Review of the Transportation Bill (T-Bill)**

The House Transportation Committee is reviewing the Agency of Transportation's proposed \$883 million budget for Fiscal Year 2026 (the T-Bill). A key focus of this review is identifying opportunities to increase funding for local municipalities, specifically for Town Highway Bridges, Structures, and Class 2 Roadways (which currently show a funding decrease in the proposed budget). The T-Bill also proposes reductions in funding for Paving, Interstate Bridges, and Public Transit.

### **Agency of Transportation Revenue**

Projected revenues for the Agency of Transportation are expected to decline year-over-year. This is due

in part to decreasing gas-tax revenue as more Vermonters adopt Electric Vehicles (EVs) and Plug-in Hybrid Electric Vehicles (PHEVs). Projections indicate a potential shortfall of \$30 million in 2027 and \$45 million in 2028 due to a decline in matching federal funds. Additionally, VTrans currently allocates approximately \$72 million to other state funds, including education.

To address these revenue challenges, an additional fee on EVs and PHEVs has been added to registration fees as a short-term measure. A Mileage-Based User Fee (MBUF) is under development as a more permanent solution. Other potential revenue sources are also being considered, including a home-delivery fee on packages, charged to retailers.

### **Useful Resources for the Public**

Vermonters can find information on road conditions, scheduled paving projects, construction updates, plow locations, and more through the following resources:

- VTrans Website: <https://vtrans.vermont.gov/contact-us>
- VTransparency: [VTransparency.vermont.gov](https://VTransparency.vermont.gov)
- VTrans Social Media: @aotvermont

## **Ways & Means**

### **Updating the State's Grand List**

The Ways and Means Committee is working on a committee bill to establish a system of property reappraisals that will update the state's grand list on a regular and more frequent basis. An accurate and current grand list is critical for a fair and equitable statewide education tax. The State asks a lot of town listers, and many towns struggle to find qualified individuals willing to fill this important role. The creation of a consistent statewide grand list will enable the fair taxation of different types of property at different rates (e.g., second homes at a different rate than affordable rentals).

### **How We Fund Schools**

The Ways and Means committee is painstakingly reviewing the assumptions and numbers used in the Governor's proposal for moving to a "foundation formula" for school funding. This would radically change how the State funds public education, providing school districts with a per-pupil "base amount" that is adjusted for student needs requiring extra instruction or facilities. While we agree that the foundation

formula approach is an efficient way to distribute funds to students and schools based on their needs, there are significant gaps and issues in the assumptions and numbers used by the Governor that will require updates and further analysis. In an effort to give local communities more flexibility, the Governor has proposed a “school district spending tax” in which a school district can spend more than the base amount if approved by the voters. For districts with limited taxing capacity (below the median grand list per pupil), the State would provide a portion of the school district spending tax. The committee will be taking additional testimony on both of these provisions before taking action in the coming weeks.

### **Property Tax Credit**

The committee is considering adjustments to the Property Tax Credit program by adjusting the income and property value limits that have been in statute since 1997, and other proposals that would simplify the administration and calculation of the credits. Lastly, the committee is examining equitable ways to use one-time surplus funds in the General Fund to “buy down” statewide property taxes for FY2026. We will continue to take testimony on the impact of this proposal on future years and need to determine how it factors into the transition plan for education spending.

### **Other Tax Relief**

The Ways and Means Committee is considering proposals to increase tax relief for low-income tax filers by increasing the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) for filers \*without\* children to 100% of the federal allowance. This would increase the refundable credit to \$649 for tax filers with income under \$26,214 (married, filing jointly). Also under consideration is an expansion of the Child Tax Credit to include children under the age of 6, up from 5. This will increase the number of eligible filers by an estimated 18% and provide additional refundable tax credits for low-income families. The committee is also considering increasing the exemption for Social Security income by \$5,000 when the Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) for tax filers is \$55,000 for individuals and \$70,000 for joint filers.

## **Most Recent Authored Op-Ed**

### **The Hidden Tax on Your Life: Why Data Privacy is the Key to Unlocking Affordability**

(Published in VTDigger on February 4, 2025)

Jan. 28 marked International Data Privacy Day, a mo-

ment to reflect on the digital world we inhabit and the price we pay for its conveniences. Technology permeates every facet of our lives, offering innovations that simplify our daily routines, from smart homes to online shopping.

Yet, beneath the surface of convenience lies a troubling reality: many of these services are designed to extract and monetize our personal data, creating a system where our information is exploited for profit with little regard for our privacy or autonomy. This trade-off, often hidden from view, has created a hidden tax, one that impacts our wallets, our opportunities and the very fabric of our society.

Imagine a world where your physical space is constantly invaded. Someone enters your home, rifles through your personal documents, takes your fingerprints and meticulously logs your every move. This would be a blatant invasion of privacy, protected against by our Constitution. Yet, in the digital realm, this is precisely what data-hungry corporations do. Our phones, apps and smart devices constantly collect data on us — where we go, what we buy, what we read, what we believe — and all this information is sold and shared, fueling a surveillance economy that operates in the shadows.

Algorithms fed by this data make automated decisions that impact everything: employment opportunities, loan applications, housing availability, insurance premiums and even the prices we see for everyday goods. This year, the national conversation has rightly focused on affordability. But these conversations are incomplete without addressing one of the root causes: the unchecked collection, use and sale of our personal data.

Opaque data practices and algorithmic collusion are harming everyday Americans in the real world. Take the allegations of surveillance pricing in the rental market, where landlords allegedly used software driven by shared data to artificially inflate rents. Grocery store chains are reportedly using algorithms fueled by consumer data to drive up prices. Ride-sharing services have come under scrutiny, with accusations that their algorithms engage in dynamic pricing that borders on exploitation. Faulty credit scores based on flawed data can lead to loan denials. The job application process is increasingly fraught, with qualified candidates often rejected by automated systems due to biased or inaccurate data before a human ever sees their resume. Even wages aren't safe, with companies accused of using data-driven tools to suppress worker pay.

These aren't isolated incidents; they're symptoms of

a systemic problem. Their addiction to collecting and monetizing our personal data is a direct assault on our ability to live affordable lives. We're told to work harder and budget better, but the deck is stacked against us. Small businesses and nonprofits are caught in a similar trap, pouring money into online behavioral advertising, controlled by a handful of data monopolies, entering bidding wars against corporate behemoths in a digital black hole.

We can't talk about affordability without talking about pulling back the curtain on the massive companies that control the digital infrastructure that our societal systems depend upon. Policy efforts to solve everyday affordability issues that fail to address this data privacy crisis are a fool's errand. If we are serious about addressing the cost of living, we must advance policies that shift power away from the data-industrial complex and back to American consumers.

The Constitution, if written in 2025, would undoubtedly include protections for our digital selves. Since Congress has failed to pass comprehensive federal data privacy legislation, states must step up and enact privacy laws that guarantee us the right to access, correct, delete and control our personal data, while placing meaningful limits on its use and collection. We need laws that prevent data-driven discrimination and empower us to challenge the automated decisions that impact our lives. Furthermore, we need regulations that specifically address algorithmic collusion and price fixing.

This isn't just about privacy — it's about economic justice. It's about ensuring that everyone has a fair shot at a decent life, free from the hidden tax of unchecked data collection. When concentrated power interests abuse our personal data, they put consumers at their mercy, making this a critical kitchen table issue. The time for half-measures is over. We need bold action, a societal awakening to the true cost of our digital dependence. We need to demand transparency, accountability and, ultimately, control over our data. Our affordability, our opportunity, and our future depend on it.

To read more articles, op-eds, and to listen to recent interviews you can find a selection at [priestleyvt.com/updates](http://priestleyvt.com/updates).

## Recent Bills

The following are bills that I am leading or co-leading so far for the 2025-2026 biennium. For a full list of bills I have signed onto as a co-sponsor, you can visit my page on the Vermont General Assembly's

website.

### Consumer Protection

- H.160 Right to Repair: Medical Devices (Co-Lead)
- H.161 Vermont Fair Repair Act: General, Agriculture & Forestry (Co-Lead)
- H.208 Vermont Data Privacy & Online Surveillance Act (Companion S.71)
- H.210 Vermont Age-Appropriate Design Code Act (Companion S.69)
- H.211 Vermont Delete Act (Companion S.70)
- H.340 AI: Algorithmic Discrimination & Automated Decision Systems
- H.341 AI: Oversight & Safety Standards
- H.360 Privacy Protections for Mobile Identifications
- H.366 Neurological Rights
- H.389 Rental Housing Price Fixing (Short Form)
- H.390 Advertising Technology Transparency (Short Form)
- H.391 Business Model Transparency (Short Form)

### Judiciary

- H.342 Nondisclosure Of Certain Public Servant Personal Information

### Economic Development

- H.257 Right to Start / Office of Entrepreneurship
- H.332 Small Business Technical Assistance Exchange

### Labor

- H.261 4-Day Work Week
- H.262 Employee Electronic Monitoring & Automated Decision Making Systems
- H.263 Right to Disconnect
- H.387 Right of Publicity (Short Form)
- H.388 Digital Replicas (Short Form)

### Education

- H.297 Free Degree Promise Program for the Community College of Vermont
- H.318 Computer Science Education

### Health

- H.260 Vermont Food Safety Act (Co-Lead)
- H.417 School Food Safety Act (Co-Lead)

**Financial Regulation & Insurance**

- H.124 Dept. of Financial Regulation Supervision & Annual Report
- H.163 Workers' Compensation Updates
- H.356 Unemployment Benefit Modernization Advisory Committee

**Special Funds & Tax**

- H.164 Local Option Tax Revenue & PILOT Special Fund (Short Form)
- H.443 Vacant Property Tax (Short Form, Co-Lead)

