



Week 12 - April 3, 2020

THE VERMONT **STATEHOUSE INSIDER**

Weekly politics & analysis
of the issues in Montpelier



THE NEW NORMAL

A NOTE FROM THE LEONINE TEAM

We are wrapping up week 12 of the 2020 legislative session but more appropriately we are in week three of what is for all practical purposes an entirely new legislative session. Because of the significant changes not only in the legislature but in all aspects of life in Vermont and throughout the country we will be expanding our newsletter to include updates and information about how government affairs and strategic communications are rapidly evolving in this new, uncharted era. We will continue to document the high (and low) points of the week in Vermont politics and will add insights into how the COVID-19 crisis

is affecting the already turbulent world of public affairs.

This week we are pleased to feature a piece from Alex MacLean, President of Public Relations and Strategic Communications at Leonine Public Affairs. Alex talks about how businesses and organizations can continue to communicate with their target audiences during a crisis. We also invite readers to visit our [COVID-19 Resource Page](#) courtesy of Leonine FOCUS, our multi-state tracking business. It includes the latest updates on COVID-19 executive orders, regulation, legislation and political activity from around the country.

VERMONT POLITICS - WEEK 12

The legislature started to settle into the new normal of operating remotely. The irony of the general assembly not being able to assemble began to wear off and committees in both the House and Senate started to meet with some regularity. All the activity remains focused on the response to the COVID-19 crisis, although leaders in both the House and Senate have made clear there is still a possibility some normal legislative priorities will make it through the process.

On Friday, the Senate Rules Committee unanimously approved a new rule that will allow the Senate to conduct floor debate and votes remotely via an on-line platform. Senators are expected to return to the statehouse next Wednesday to approve the rule. The Senate could hold its first remote floor session as early as next Thursday to take up COVID-19 response bills being drafted in the Health & Welfare, Judiciary, Institutions and Government Operations Committees.

The main legislative theme this week was unpacking the CARES Act, the latest federal stimulus package to address the COVID-19 crisis. Various legislative committees heard from Scott administration officials and representatives from Vermont's congressional delegation about how the stimulus would support Vermont's efforts to fight the virus. The CARES Act offers much needed financial support for hospitals and health care providers who are having to cancel elective procedures and other activities that normally support their

bottom lines. Lawmakers also worked to understand how the CARES Act will support businesses that have shut down and employees who have been laid off during the crisis. Unemployment has escalated at an astronomical rate in the past three weeks, and lawmakers are eager to understand the resources available so they can advise their constituents through this difficult process.

But with the positive news about the support coming from Washington, the virus continued to escalate in Vermont. As a result the Scott administration issued additional orders to limit in-person contact by ordering big box stores to cease selling many products. Wal-Mart and other stores are allowed to continue to sell groceries, medicine and emergency gear, but must cease selling other items deemed non-essential during the crisis. The administration also ramped up enforcement efforts of existing orders, warning short-term rental operators and other businesses that may be out of compliance to shut down or face consequences.

On the medical front the month of April is quickly coming into focus as the make or break period for fighting COVID-19. There was some good news this week that the prevention measures taken by the government and Vermonters are showing signs of starting to pay off. [Early indications](#) are that the curve in Vermont is indeed starting to bend and testing has ramped up which gives officials better information on the spread of the virus. But the worst still appears yet to come, with the peak in Vermont expected to hit late April. It likely means restrictions on movement and commerce will continue for at least a few weeks if not longer. Hospitals throughout Vermont have identified “surge” facilities and are working hard to secure equipment for when the peak hits. Most in need is the personal protective equipment that protects healthcare workers and patients on the front lines.

Government officials also urged out-of-staters, and particularly residents of hard-hit New York City to stay home or self-quarantine for two weeks if they come into the state. This sentiment has led to disagreement between those who feel we should not turn away those seeking refuge from the virus, and those who believe it is irresponsible for others to potentially endanger Vermonters and our health care system. This highlights an uncomfortable dynamic for a state

that in normal times relies on visitors to drive our economy.

It is impossible to say what next week will bring. Everyone who works in and around the statehouse would likely say that during normal times, even though in normal times it is probably an exaggeration. Right now it is not, and as this crisis continues to unfold, more unprecedented events are likely to follow.

ALEX MACLEAN: CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS IN THE COVID-19 ERA

The COVID-19 pandemic is the greatest crisis that most of us have ever faced. A few short months ago it was unimaginable that healthcare and other essential workers would soon be on the frontlines of the battle against a deadly global pandemic. It was unthinkable that business owners and their employees would soon need to shut down or become unemployed or at best need to significantly modify their business models to work remotely in the new reality. It was just as unimaginable that teachers, students and parents would need to adapt to remote learning and homeschooling. We Vermonters, and indeed people around the world, are stuck in our homes and it is unknown when our world will start to return to normal or what normal will even mean.

It's a scary time. For business, it's a time when being creative, being able to make snap decisions and being able to weather an unprecedented storm is of paramount importance.

The Public Relations and Strategic Communications division of our firm provides crisis communications services. We help businesses navigate crisis situations and develop and disseminate the information needed to move forward and overcome their immediate challenges. In normal times these situations tend to be somewhat unique to the particular client. Right now, every business is facing similar challenges.

How do you communicate your company's business status, mission and focus in a world that has been turned upside down? While non-profits, businesses and

public entities all have very different missions and content to communicate, there are a few basic rules of communicating during a crisis that are true for everyone.

Pretty much everyone has thrown out screen time rules and are spending hours scrolling through news sites, social media feeds and websites looking for content. So, the number one rule is to share. Whether it is through social media, a blog or a newsletter - tell your story, share your ideas, get the facts out.

1. Post. People are thirsty for information. On social media platforms, we typically recommend posting 3-4 times a week on Facebook and 10-14 times on Twitter. For now, throw those recommendations out. Post every day, or even twice a day on Facebook, and multiple times a day on Twitter. Create your own eye-catching content if possible, with memes, video messages, and quality pictures.
2. Write. Create a blog for your website (if you don't already have one) and start writing. Create a newsletter (if you don't already have one) and start communicating with your email lists about what is happening with your business or non-profit. Share how Covid is impacting you and your employees and what you are doing about it, ideas that can help others get through this and provide reasons for hope.
3. Pitch. Share your story with reporters – either directly by phone or through press releases. If you are an organization that has information related to Covid, share it. Err on the side of disclosure. The public wants to know. Include a clear explanation of what your company is doing to manage the situation, keep customers/patients safe and the expected path forward.
4. Clearly post information. Don't make people search for what you know they want. Provide continuous updates and even if there's nothing new to report provide the information you can. Put a temporary header on your website or create a pop up that loads immediately on the homepage, highlighting the important details and action steps you are taking. On social media "pin" a post relating to the crisis at the top of your feeds.

These are some steps that allow your business or organization to continue to reach your audience and to continue to elevate your profile while the chaos of this moment may limit or eliminate your usual methods for doing so. These are actions that don't cost much money and can be done remotely. It's a way to stay active when your business may otherwise be forced into inactivity. Right now it is critical for businesses and organizations to remain in motion and fortunately with our technology we can keep moving, even when the world grinds to a halt.

To learn more about Alex and Leonine Public Affairs please visit leoninepublicaffairs.com.

EMERGENCY TRANSPORTATION LAW ENACTED

Governor Scott signed H.742, an emergency COVID-19 response bill, on Monday, March 30. The bulk of the bill relates to health care but there are transportation sections as well. The bill allows photographs on driver's license renewals to be up to 16 years old to allow more people to remotely renew their licenses. The bill also requires the Commissioner of DMV to extend for 90 days beyond expiration, all driver's licenses, learner's permits, privileges to operate, non-driver identification cards, registrations, and registration plates or placards for an individual with a disability. Here is a [link](#) to the bill as enacted into law. See Sections 35-37 for the transportation sections.

T-BILL AND DMV MISCELLANEOUS BILL

This week representatives of AOT and DMV presented scaled back "must pass" versions of the Transportation Bill (H.942) and the DMV Miscellaneous bill (S.339) to the House Transportation Committee. The committee discussed the possibility that "must pass" provisions in these two bills may be rolled into a large second budget adjustment act to the FY2020 budget rather than pass as stand-alone bills.

Of interest to VADA in the T-Bill (H.942), Sections 11 and 12 amend the existing EV incentives and programs. Also noteworthy, Sec. 1a gives AOT wide latitude to shift money to new road projects if the state receives significant funding from an expected federal Covid-19 infrastructure/transportation stimulus bill. Here is a [link](#) to the “must pass” T-Bill.

The pared-down DVM Miscellaneous bill, 339, can be found [here](#). One section of interest to VADA that was removed authorized DMV to issue in-transit plates for private motor vehicle sales.