

**Week 9 - March 13, 2020**

# THE VERMONT **STATEHOUSE INSIDER**

Weekly politics & analysis  
of the issues in Montpelier



## **PANDEMIC CONCERNS INTERRUPT LEGISLATIVE SESSION**

It was a surreal week for the world, the nation and the state. Inside the golden dome was no exception. On Saturday, March 7, Health Department Officials announced Vermont's first presumptive positive case of COVID-19. Public gatherings and events began to shut down in an effort to limit the spread of the virus, and Vermont officials immediately began holding press conferences and addressing protocols, contingency plans and trying to alleviate public fears while keeping citizens safe.

On Tuesday, the legislature returned after their usual Town Meeting Day week-

long break to an atmosphere of confusion and uncertainty. In order to “flatten the curve” - in other words limit the spread of the virus - health officials have strongly encouraged and in some cases mandated social distancing. The statehouse by its very nature involves working long hours in small, confined and oftentimes poorly ventilated rooms. Many who work in the statehouse are over 60 and thus in the higher risk demographic for the virus. It is also a place where people come from every corner of the state and at the end of the week return to their respective towns after interacting with one another. On any given day the statehouse is inundated by school groups, tour groups, advocacy groups and any number of public onlookers. One of the most beloved features of the Vermont statehouse is that people can come and go as they please. But during a pandemic, that no longer seems like a good thing. And so the question all week was whether or not the legislature would adjourn as a result of the virus, and if so, how legislative business would continue until it is safe to return.

On Thursday a second presumptive positive COVID-19 case was reported. After two days of committees working long hours to get their respective priorities voted out before an anticipated shutdown, the Joint Rules Committee, which includes the House Speaker, President of the Senate and other leaders from both chambers, met on Thursday evening to decide on the best course of action.

On Friday morning a motion to adjourn was formally passed by the Joint Rules Committee and it was announced that the legislature would temporarily shut down for a week. It was also announced that the crossover deadline, (the deadline by which bills must be voted out of the policy committees) would be extended. This means lawmakers can take the temporary break without having to push through non-emergency legislative priorities. The rest of the day was spent working both in committees and on the floor to create emergency legislation to provide more resources to the health care system and expand access to prescription drugs. The House also considered actions to mitigate potential negative impacts on tax revenues and the economy as a whole, assist mortgage holders and renters, and lend support to the education, child care and senior care systems.

The current situation remains fluid, and what will happen in the coming days, weeks and months is anyone's guess. Here are some of the next steps that seem as certain as anything can be during these strange times: The statehouse will be getting a deep cleaning while lawmakers are away. House committees will not be meeting at all next week, but Senate committees will continue to meet by phone or video conference with the public welcome to join. The Senate caucus of the whole will likely meet every day in the same manner. The Joint Rules Committee will also meet remotely over the break to identify bills that are eligible for extended crossover and to establish the new crossover deadline. The legislature is currently set to return on March 24, although legislative leaders acknowledge the session could be delayed longer. This is an unprecedented situation and everything is subject to change.

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## **DIRECT MOTOR VEHICLE SALES**

On Friday, the Senate Transportation Committee passed S.241, An Act Relating to Motor Vehicle Manufacturers that Sell Directly to Consumers, by a 4-0-1 vote. Sen. Ashe missed the vote because he was working on COVID-19 emergency measures so the committee was holding the vote open for him. The bill includes a study only. VADA supported a study to thoughtfully consider the issues before making any changes to the law. A large number of dealers attended a hearing on Thursday morning. Mark Alderman and Mark Saba testified in support of the study and in opposition to other provisions in the bill that would have allowed a manufacturer of electric vehicles to open a sales, display and service/warranty facility in Vermont and not be subject to the franchise law. [Here is a link](#) to the study language (Sec. 1) the committee approved. Note that Secs. 2 & 3 were removed from the bill.

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## **TRANSPORTATION BILL**

On Friday the House Transportation Committee voted to approve the Transportation Bill, which contains the FY21 Transportation Budget and miscellaneous transportation related provisions. Section 12 extends and makes changes to the Vehicle Incentive and Emissions Repair Programs that were created last year. Section 13 requires AOT, in consultation with other agencies, to design a pilot program to collect a per-kilowatt hour (kWh) fee for charging EVs with the revenue generated directed to the Transportation Fund. [Here is the version](#) of the bill that the House Transportation Committee advanced.

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## **DMV MISCELLANEOUS BILL**

The DMV Miscellaneous Bill, S.339, was on the Senate floor for action this week. Sen. Tim Ashe, D-Chittenden, considered proposing a floor amendment related to the Transportation Climate Initiative but decided against doing so. The 65-page bill contains various changes that affect DMV laws.

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## **GREENHOUSE GAS EMISSIONS IN TRANSPORTATION**

This week the Senate Finance Committee approved S.337, An Act Relating to Energy Efficiency Entities and Programs to Reduce Greenhouse Gas Emissions in the Thermal Energy and Transportation Sectors. The bill authorizes the use of up to \$2 million per year from existing electric efficiency funds for up to 3 years to be spent on programs, measures and services that reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the thermal energy or transportation sectors. The Senate Finance Committee's version of the bill can be found on page 726 of the [Senate Calendar](#) for Friday, 3/13.