



Week 17 - May 8, 2020

# THE VERMONT **STATEHOUSE INSIDER**

Weekly politics & analysis  
of the issues in Montpelier



Please visit [our website](#) for our in-depth reporting on COVID-19 throughout the United States. This site is courtesy of [Leonine FOCUS](#), our 50-state legislative regulatory, tracking and reporting service. The site is frequently updated and includes information on executive orders, legislation, regulation, tax deadlines and more from across the country.

## GET OUTSIDE

Vermont officials said this week that the COVID-19 infection rate has been lower than originally projected and lower than our neighboring states. This news comes as the Scott Administration continues to cautiously remove work and social restrictions and the legislature begins to work on legislation aiding the long process of economic recovery.

On Wednesday Governor Phil Scott announced that he was loosening the stay at home order to allow outdoor recreation activity and some inter-household socializing. Groups of up to 10 people can now gather outdoors as long as they recognize social distancing and safety protocols. Families can meet with other families and children can play together so long as they follow social distancing and safety protocols. The administration issued new safety guidance for these interactions and allowed businesses, nonprofits and government agencies to open outdoor recreation areas. These include parks, golf courses, trail networks and big game check stations. Campgrounds, marinas and beaches remained closed and anyone entering the state is still required to quarantine for 14 days.

On Friday Governor Scott announced that child care providers and summer day programs can reopen on June 1, which would help support families who are returning to work. There will be \$6 million in grants available to these providers. Governor Scott and members of his team said that in the coming weeks they hope to issue

guidance to allow overnight summer camps to open.

However, at Friday's press conference Education Secretary Daniel French said graduation ceremonies for 2020 graduates will either need to be conducted in small groups or virtually. Secretary French did say he is optimistic schools can resume in-person instruction in the fall but there will still need to be a heavy focus on continuing to improve remote learning capabilities.

Administration officials offered the Legislature a [proposal](#) for an unprecedented second adjustment to the FY2020 budget. The proposal calls for closing most of the \$195 million gap in the FY2020 budget with \$138 million in reserve funds and nearly \$47 million in excess Medicaid dollars. The Medicaid monies are available due to a decline in the utilization of non-emergency health care services as a result of the restrictions imposed by the governor's "stay safe/stay home" order and an increase in federal Medicaid matching dollars. In addition, perhaps due to the crisis, the Department of Liquor Control revenues are up \$4.6 million and that revenue will also be used to close the gap. The administration is hopeful the reserve funds will be refilled when taxes that were due on April 15 are paid on the new July 15 due date. The rest of the shortfall would be made up with smaller scale adjustments to current funding levels. Legislative leaders in both the House and Senate have indicated they are supportive of the administration's proposal.

The budget discussions and discussions around how the \$1.25 billion in federal stimulus funding will be appropriated will continue to heat up through the month of May. Fortunately health

indicators [continue to improve](#), but we have a long road to recovery ahead of them.

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## VEMONT STATE COLLEGES

This week House Speaker Mitzi Johnson and Senate Pro Tem Tim Ashe issued a joint statement committing that all Vermont State College (VSC) campuses will remain open in the fall. The Speaker and Pro Tem also agreed to develop a transition plan and one-year bridge funding for the 2020-21 academic year. On Wednesday, during an all House Caucus, the Speaker provided more detail regarding the three next steps for VSC:

1. The Governor, Pro Tem and Speaker all have agreed to hire a consultant to perform an independent financial assessment of VSC.
2. VSC will develop a variety of operating levels for the fall so they can determine what a transition year could look like. VSC is also coming up with bridge funding proposals.
3. The legislature will work on legislation to hire a consultant or create a working group to develop a 21st century higher education system that provides opportunities regardless of geography and financial need in order to meet the needs of students and families, rural areas and Vermont's workforce. The Speaker stated the work by the consultant or working

group will look beyond VSC at the entire higher education system and will be done in the summer or fall.

This week VSC also submitted a [letter](#) to lawmakers and the administration requesting a \$5.1 million appropriation for reimbursement of the room and board payments that VSC agreed to refund students when in-person instruction ended and dormitories were closed in March due to COVID-19. VSC requested these funds come from the state's Coronavirus Relief Fund (CRF), which consists of the \$1.25 billion the state received from the federal CARES Act.

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## HOUSE ACTION

On Wednesday the House met remotely and approved a Joint Resolution to postpone the Joint Assembly's vote on the retention of five Superior Judges and one Environmental Judge.

The House met again on Friday and gave approval to three committee bills:

- [H.948](#) came from the House Government Operations Committee. The bill authorizes municipalities to hold town level quasi-judicial proceedings remotely and suspends requirements for certain in-person inspections of properties that are the subject of a quasi judicial proceeding.
- [H.947](#) allows, during the declared state of emergency due to COVID-19, the legislative body of a municipality to adopt a

budget and a municipal tax rate for the next fiscal year without voter approval.

- [H.950](#) came from the House Human Services Committee and allows for the remote witnessing of advanced directives for the duration of the COVID-19 crisis.

During a House Rules Committee meeting on Thursday, House Speaker Mitzi Johnson indicated she is gathering information from committee chairs on their priorities, and that additional committee bills are allowed despite being late into the session. Committee bills will require a waiver from the Rules Committee before being taken up by the full House. The bills in question do not all deal directly with the pandemic, but were either committee priorities prior to the COVID-19 crisis or deal with statutes and sunsets set to go into effect in the next few months that may need to be tweaked due to the crisis.