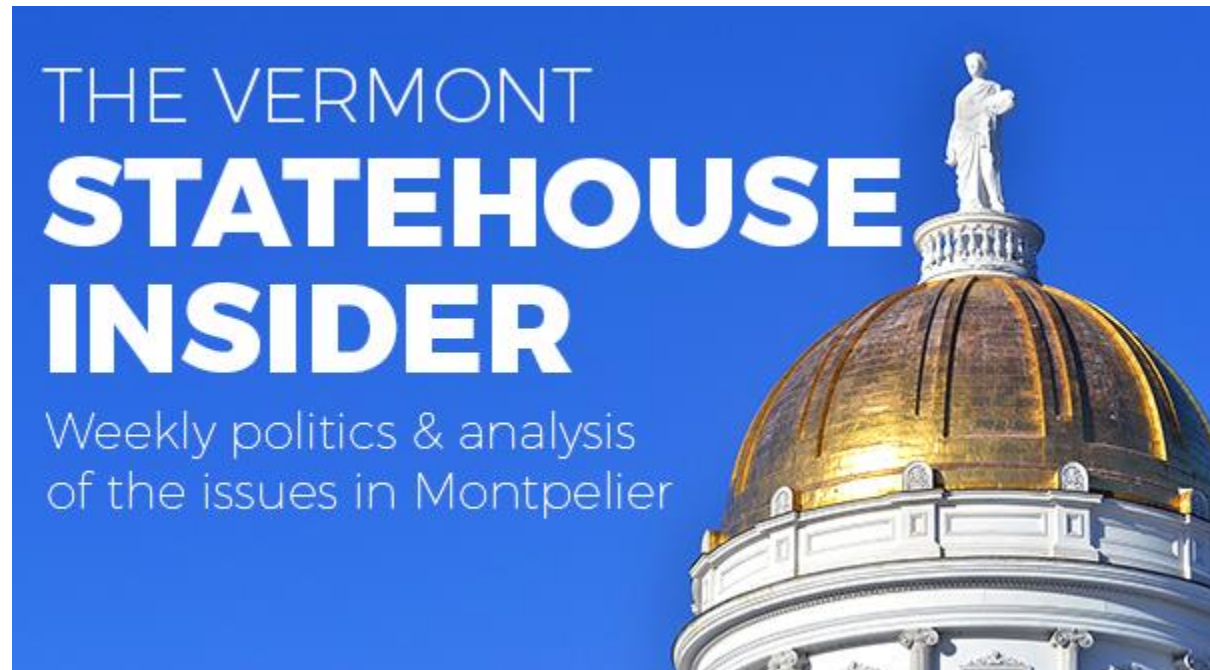


Week 13 - April 8 , 2022



Gordon Wisbach
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The Beginning of the End?

A debate earlier in the year about whether to switch to single-member legislative districts in the House was officially put to rest when Governor Phil Scott signed the redistricting bill, H.722, into law. The bill will see the state continuing to use multi-member districts for the next decade. Redistricting is a decennial process using census data to ensure Vermont remains in compliance with the U.S. Supreme Court's one-vote per person standard. The bill reapportions Vermont's 180 legislators based on the state's changing demographics. Under the new Senate map, the Northeast Kingdom will lose one senator to Chittenden County. Changes to the House map are more extensive,

but are not expected to significantly change the political makeup of the chamber.

The discussion over universal school meals continued this week. The program started during the pandemic with the federal government picking up the tab for students receiving free school meals regardless of family income. The Vermont Senate has already passed a bill extending the availability of free school meals in public schools after federal funds expire in June. Lawmakers have been exploring raising taxes to pay for universal school meals but Governor Scott has opposed this idea, arguing the state should not raise taxes when it has large surpluses and federal stimulus dollars are available. The House Education Committee this week advanced [its own version of the bill](#) that uses \$29 million from the Education Fund to pay for the program during the 2022-2023 school year. The House Education Committee also proposed to require the Joint Fiscal Office to report by February 1, 2023, on possible revenue sources to pay for universal school meals going forward including expansion of the sales tax base, enacting a tax on sugar sweetened beverages, or other sources of revenue not ordinarily used for General Fund purposes.

In the Senate, policy committees are working through House bills and developing budget recommendations for the Senate Appropriations Committee, which is marking up the FY2023 budget. Budget recommendations from policy committees are expected to be submitted by next week. The Senate Transportation Committee and Senate Institutions Committee are working to finalize their versions of the annual transportation budget and capital budget adjustment respectively. Both bills include significant increases in federal funding as a result of the American Rescue Plan Act and Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. The Senate Economic Development, Housing and General Affairs Committee took extensive testimony this week on H.703, the workforce development bill, which allocates tens of millions of dollars toward growing the workforce in nursing, the trades and other sectors.

Between the FY2023 budget, transportation bill, capital bill, workforce development bill and other spending bills, the legislature is considering a budget that exceeds \$8 billion for the first time in history. This is in large part due to federal aid as well as strong state revenues. As May approaches, there is a sense in the statehouse that tension is growing between the administration and legislature over spending priorities. There have been disagreements about spending over the past two fiscal years but with COVID-19 being the top concern and an unprecedented amount of federal aid coming into the state, the governor and lawmakers were mostly able to put their differences aside and find agreement on the budget. However, the 2022 session is starting to feel more like the pre-pandemic years when the administration and legislature battled over the budget, and Governor Scott issued more than one veto of spending bills passed by the Democratic-controlled legislature.

Another factor in 2022 is the election season, which will begin as soon as the legislative session ends. With an open Congressional seat and open statewide offices there are a number of lawmakers and state officials who will be running contested campaigns for higher office. It will be interesting to see how this all plays out in the coming weeks.

Also of note this week is the public announcement by Green Mountain Care Board

Chair Kevin Mullin that he will step down from his post in July. The Board regulates hospital budgets, health insurance rates, the construction of new health care facilities and the purchase of expensive health care equipment such as MRI machines. Chair Mullin, who previously served in the Vermont Senate for a number of years, said he intends to step away from public life.

DMV Miscellaneous Bill

This week the House Transportation Committee continued its work on [S.280](#), An act relating to miscellaneous changes to laws related to vehicles. The bill contains sections related to new motor vehicle arbitration, the total abstinence program, overweight truck permits, nonresident titles, the purchase and use tax and towing abandoned vehicles. The committee took testimony this week on updating Vermont's distracted driving laws and proposals by Rep. Curt McCormack, D-Burlington, related to bicycle safety in high risk corridors and a [public outreach campaign related to Vermont's vehicle idling law](#).

Transportation Bill

This week the Senate Transportation Committee took testimony on [H.736](#), An act relating to the Transportation Program and miscellaneous changes to laws related to transportation. They considered amendments related to governance of the Burlington airport and the [sale of state surplus vehicles](#), among other things. They hope to complete their work on the bill next week.