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THE VERMONT **STATEHOUSE INSIDER**

Weekly politics & analysis
of the issues in Montpelier



WORLDS APART

The Vermont General Assembly convened this week for the 2021-2022 legislative biennium. Newly elected and returning lawmakers and statewide officials were sworn in remotely or in socially distanced ceremonies at the capitol. Republican Governor Phil Scott issued his Inaugural address to a televised audience from the executive office building instead of giving the traditional speech in the House chamber. These unusual commencement events are the result of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

History was made when Representative Jill Krowinski, D-Burlington, and

Senator Becca Balint, D-Windham, were elected House Speaker and Senate President Pro Tem respectively. Along with the swearing in of Democratic Lt. Governor Molly Gray this marks the first time in Vermont history that both chambers of the General Assembly are led by women.

Speaker Krowinski and President Pro Tem Balint highlighted the response to the COVID-19 pandemic as the top priority for the session. Broadband deployment to support Vermonters who are going to school and working remotely will be a top priority as will ensuring Vermonters have access to affordable housing. Childcare is another top priority that has been highlighted by both legislative leaders and the governor, as working parents struggle to balance careers and caring for children through the hardest months of the pandemic.

Another pandemic-related priority that lawmakers will tackle out of the gate is authorizing towns to conduct Town Meeting remotely. COVID-19 had just reached the United States during Town Meeting 2020 and statewide shutdowns began a week later. Now lawmakers need to authorize procedures to ensure Town Meeting can be conducted safely.

The legislature will meet remotely at least for the month of January, but everyone expects “Zoom lawmaking” will continue well into the legislative session.

The unusual start to the 2021 legislative session was overshadowed by the dark events in Washington DC on Wednesday, January 6. A mob of Trump supporters incited by President Trump stormed Congress in a violent attempt to overturn the results of a fair presidential election and install the current president for an additional term. At least five people were killed due to the riots, including a U.S. Capitol Police officer. Governor Phil Scott was one of the first Republican officials to strongly condemn the insurrection. In a statement released early Wednesday evening, Governor Scott said: “The fabric of our democracy and the principles of our republic are under attack by

the President. Enough is enough. President Trump should resign or be removed from office by his Cabinet, or by the Congress.”

COMMITTEES APPOINTED

The Speaker has sole authority to appoint the members of House committees and often with a new Speaker there are significant committee shakeups. That was not the case when newly elected Speaker Krowinski announced House committee assignments this week. Only two out of the fourteen standing House committees have new chairs, namely Representative Mary Hooper, D-Montpelier, Chair of the House Appropriations Committee (after the former Chair retired), and Representative Diane Lanpher, D-Vergennes, Chair of the House Transportation Committee.

In the Senate, the Committee on Committees, which consists of Lieutenant Governor Molly Gray, Senate Pro Tem Becca Balint and Senator Dick Mazza, D-Colchester/Grand Isle, appoints committees. Out of the eleven standing Senate committees, only the Senate Education Committee has a new chair, Senator Brian Campion, D-Bennington. The Senate Education committee saw significant turnover with only one member who served last year returning, Senator Andrew Perchlik, D-Washington.

The full membership of House and Senate committees can be found [here](#) (click Show All Members).

STATE OF THE STATE AND LEGISLATIVE SPEECHES

Governor Scott delivered his third inaugural address on Thursday evening. Under normal circumstances, the address would have been delivered during

the day to a joint assembly of the legislature in the House chamber filled with guests and dignitaries. Instead, with social distancing measures in place, the governor spoke to the cameras from a largely empty room in a live televised address. Scott highlighted Vermonters' response to the COVID-19 pandemic and called for unity in fighting the pandemic and addressing the challenges facing the state. While the substantive proposals are usually reserved for the budget address, the governor did highlight several initiatives including expanding tax increment financing to smaller towns, modernizing Act 250, exempting licensed preschools from the statewide property tax, and encouraging families to move to Vermont.

After the governor's speech, House Speaker Jill Krowinski and Senate President Pro Tem Becca Balint each delivered their own addresses. Both leaders took the opportunity to respond to the seditious attack on Congress and to denounce President Trump, echoing the governor's message of bipartisanship.

LEGISLATURE ADOPTS RESOLUTION CONDEMNING THE ATTACK ON THE U.S. CAPITOL

On Thursday the House adopted, on a 131-16 vote, [JRH 1](#), a resolution sponsored by 121 House members condemning Wednesday's attack on the U.S. Capitol building as an attack on democracy. The resolution goes on to call on President Trump to resign from office or to be removed from office by his cabinet or by Congress. The Senate promptly adopted the resolution on Friday by voice vote, with newly elected Senator Russ Ingalls, R-Essex-Orleans, being the only "no" vote.
