



Week 8 - February 26, 2021

THE VERMONT **STATEHOUSE INSIDER**

Weekly politics & analysis
of the issues in Montpelier



Leonine Public Affairs will not publish a newsletter the week of March 1 due to the legislative Town Meeting Break. We will resume publication beginning on March 12.

CARES 3

Vermont U.S. Representative Peter Welch met with legislators this week to provide an update on the “CARES 3” federal stimulus bill currently being considered in Congress. CARES 3, which was proposed by the Biden Administration and would authorize \$1.9 trillion in COVID-19 relief aid, is on the verge of passing the U.S. House. Rep. Welch told a joint hearing of the House Appropriations, Ways and

Means, Senate Appropriations and Finance committees that the goal is to enact Cares 3 before March 14, the date when unemployment benefits authorized in previous federal stimulus bills are set to expire.

Rep. Welch said the bill currently includes over \$900 million in federal aid for Vermont state and local government. Around \$600 million would go to state government and around \$300 million would go directly to municipalities. The funding would support the dissemination of the COVID-19 vaccine, contact tracing, efforts to reopen schools, unemployment benefits and rental assistance among other things. In addition to the funding for state and local government CARES 3 includes stimulus checks that would go directly to eligible Vermonters.

Rep. Welch said the CARES 3 bill in its current form provides more flexibility on how federal stimulus dollars can be spent and as an example noted municipalities would have the discretion to partner with private organizations like the Vermont Food Bank. CARES 3 contains substantial funding for county government and unlike other areas of the country, New England states do not have a significant county government structure. Rep. Welch said Congress is working to ensure there is a formula in place to allow states like Vermont to utilize funding allocated for county government.

The legislature will take a break next week for Town Meeting Week. When they return, policy committees will finalize and pass legislation before the crossover deadline, which is March 12 for policy bills. The following week the House Appropriations, Corrections and Institutions and Transportation committees will finalize the FY2022 budget, capital and transportation bills. The crossover deadline for money bills is March 19.

Legislative leaders announced this week that the General Assembly will meet remotely for the remainder of the 2021 legislative session. While it was universally expected, the decision to continue to meet remotely was not official until this week.

Governor Phil Scott announced on Tuesday that Vermonters age 65 and older will be eligible to register for the COVID-19 vaccine beginning Monday, March 1.

Currently registration is open to Vermonters over the age of 70. Scott added that registrations will likely open for Vermonters with health conditions that pose an elevated risk for COVID-19 in the near future. The governor also said fully vaccinated Vermonters will be able to gather with other households even if the other household is not vaccinated. He said gatherings would be limited to two households at a time. Administration health officials said they expect COVID-19 cases to continue to drop over the next six weeks.

This week Scott also addressed challenges facing school-age children and young adults in Vermont. He said it is time to address the social, emotional and educational impact of the pandemic on youth. Mental Health Commissioner Sarah Squirrell said that new data shows a spike in depression, anxiety and specifically anxiety about a lack of social connection and an increase in substance use in teens and young adults. The Agency of Education will be rolling out plans to reverse these trends in the coming weeks and months.

EXPEDITED BUDGET

On Friday the House passed H.315, An act relating to COVID-19 relief, by a vote of 141-0. This is the so-called “expedited budget” that is aimed at getting immediate relief out to those affected by COVID-19. The bill also expedites funding for housing and transportation projects so those projects can get up and running immediately rather than waiting to be funded in the FY2022 budget bill that is expected to pass in May. The House voted down an amendment on the so-called “gap funding” provision of the bill. Gap funding is a \$10 million grant program for businesses that were unable to qualify for relief through other state or federal programs. The amendment was offered by Representative Selene Colburn, P-Burlington, and would adopt recent recommendations made by Vermont State Auditor, Doug Hoffer, a Democrat. The amendment would require the Joint Fiscal Committee to approve how the Agency of Commerce and Community Development defines financial loss for the purpose of obtaining grant money and allow the state to recapture funds used for ineligible purposes. The amendment would also make clear that the grant awards can be subject to an audit. Ultimately

the amendment failed due to the concern that it would prolong the process of getting aid to businesses. [Click here](#) for the highlights of the House-passed bill. The bill was sent to the Senate for consideration.

BROADBAND

After weeks of exhaustive testimony, the House Committee on Energy and Technology unanimously approved a committee bill intended to coordinate, facilitate, support and accelerate the work of Communication Union Districts (CUDs) to expand broadband in Vermont. [H.360](#) would create the Vermont Community Broadband Authority, a revamp of the former Vermont Telecom Authority. The Authority will be tasked with fostering community broadband and community broadband partnerships, including with electric cooperatives and existing providers. The committee's intent is to separate the role of the Department of Public Services as the both the "regulator" and champion of broadband deployment. Under the bill's structure, the Authority would take on the role of broadband promotion, while the Department would remain in the regulator role. The bill heads to the House Ways and Means Committee, which will consider a provision exempting electric cooperatives who string fiber on their utility poles from the education property tax.

DIRECT TO CONSUMER SALES (S.47)

On Tuesday, 3/9, VADA representatives have been asked to present VADA's proposed language related to this bill to the Senate Transportation Committee. VADA's board is still working to finalize the proposal.

MISCELLANEOUS TRANSPORTATION BILL

The Senate passed [S.86, An act relating to miscellaneous changes to laws related to vehicles and vessels](#). The bill makes miscellaneous changes to Vermont's transportation laws including to in-transit plates, registrations, and motorboats, among many others. The bill was referred to the House Transportation Committee.

TRANSPORTATION BILL

The House Transportation Committee continues to work on a draft transportation bill, which contains the FY22 transportation budget. The bill contains numerous provisions related to EVs. On Thursday the committee heard [this presentation](#) on the Replace your Ride program from Linda McGinnis, Co-Chair, Replace Your Ride Steering Committee. Click [here](#) for the latest draft. The committee will complete work on this bill the week after next when they return from Town Meeting recess.

BILLS OF INTEREST TO VADA

[H.301](#), An act relating to limiting the transport of catalytic converters - This bill proposes to limit the hours during which a person may transport a catalytic converter.

[H.307](#), An act relating to front number plates and tinted windows on motor vehicles - This bill proposes to only require the display of the rear number plate on a motor vehicle in certain instances and permit tinting material on motor vehicle windows.

[H.311](#), An act relating to assessing long-term climate change challenges and opportunities in the State's economic and revenue forecast - This bill proposes to direct the Joint Fiscal Office and the Secretary of Administration to annually, by September 1 each year, conduct an economic analysis and forecast over a 50- year time period to assess the long-term economic and fiscal impacts, and human and public policy challenges, of climate change.

[H.312](#), An act relating to excessive motor vehicle noise - This bill proposes to, with limited exceptions, prohibit the operation of a motor vehicle equipped with an inadequate or modified muffler or exhaust system or with an amplification device.

[H.325](#), An act relating to wrecker exemption from gross weight limits on highways - This bill proposes to exempt a wrecker towing a disabled vehicle from the State's gross weight limits on highways in certain instances.

[H.335](#), An act relating to reduced motor vehicle registration fees for veterans and the maintenance of a database of veterans in Vermont - This bill proposes to waive percent of the registration fee for certain motor vehicles upon proof that the registered owner or co-owner is a veteran who received a discharge under other than dishonorable conditions. This bill also requires the Vermont Office of Veterans Affairs to develop and maintain a database of veterans in Vermont but indicates that any information that is collected is exempt from public inspection and copying.

[H.345](#), An act relating to the New PEV Incentive Program - This bill proposes to increase the Base Manufacturer's Suggested Retail Price applicable to the New PEV Incentive Program.