

2021 End of Session Report

Representative Jana Brown

Chittenden 1: Richmond



It's an honor to serve as your State Representative and our community's voice in Montpelier. The 2021 session is certainly one for the record books, both in terms of legislative business conducted via Zoom and the vast infusion of federal aid that has come to Vermont due to the global pandemic. Legislators worked diligently this session to ensure that the billions of dollars coming into the state were put to immediate and effective use in response to the crisis. In addition, I supported numerous high-impact, once-in-a-lifetime investments you will read about here that will accelerate recovery with the aim of leaving no Vermonter behind. I look forward to connecting with you out in the community – please be well.

Deep Investments to Ensure COVID Recovery

In the Spring of 2020, Vermont received \$1.25 billion in federal CARES relief. These dollars provided relief for Vermonters in desperate need, their families, their communities, and their local businesses in all 14 counties. These dollars were also key to stabilizing critical systems in the areas of health care, human services and child care.

Spring 2021 has brought Vermont \$1.052 billion in federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds, and once again the legislature is focused on leaving no one behind. To the extent allowed by federal regulation, Vermont's use of ARPA dollars is defined by a critical focus on the well-being, present and future, of Vermont's human infrastructure.

This investment is apparent in the amounts of ARPA funding allocated in the FY22 state budget, a total of \$599.2 million. Included, for instance, are \$109.2 million targeted to Economy, Workforce and Communities. \$99 million is targeted to Housing and \$51 million to Rental Assistance. There is also \$150 million for Broadband Investments and \$52 million for Technology Modernization, as well as \$50 million for Climate Action and \$115 million for Clean Water Investments. ARPA dollars not yet designated for particular uses are available as we have a better sense of ongoing or unanticipated needs. This flexibility is permitted by ARPA, as we have through FY 2025 to use these funds.

VT'ers to Weigh in on \$600 Million ARPA funds

Prior to adjournment, the Legislature approved the State Budget for FY2022, totaling \$7.35 billion. It focuses on the COVID recovery of Vermonters, their communities and local economies. It addresses head-on the costs of state government systems necessary to provide needed services and benefits to Vermonters – to all Vermonters – but particularly to the most vulnerable. With the help of substantial federal ARPA dollars, this budget positions the state and our community partners to effect transformational change moving forward.

Recognizing the unprecedented opportunity beyond FY2022 provided by these federal dollars, the state budget includes language describing a statewide, community-based engagement process to solicit Vermonter's thoughts for investing in the future of our state. Outreach this summer and fall will include non-traditional public-input events which do not rely on public hearings or online options. As much as possible, participation will be facilitated and traditional barriers removed. Vermonters' recommendations will then be reported to the requisite legislative committees for budget and policy development beginning in January 2022. The Speaker of the House and the President Pro-Tem of the Senate will lead this process. Please look forward to this opportunity to help create our future together! The general areas for discussion will include the following: Health and Well-being, Workforce Development, Housing Initiatives, Broadband Development, and Climate Change Mitigation.

Expanding Office of Racial Equity

Before the 2021 session, legislators heard from constituents that Vermonters were not only dealing with one pandemic, but three: COVID, Climate Change and Systemic Racism. In addressing systemic racism, one of the glaring needs identified was bolstering staffing at the state's Office of Racial Equity. When this office was created and Xusana Davis hired as director, the legislature didn't know the extent of how widely these services would be used and requested.

The workload has continued to grow, with the director being flooded by requests to sit on committees and boards, meet with Vermonters, review policies, and offer expertise to all three branches of state government. It became clear that the needs of the Office were great and two positions were added to the Office of Racial Equity and passed in the budget, effective in the new fiscal year, July 1, 2021.

Child Care: Essential to Economic Recovery

We know that child care is essential to supporting Vermont's children, families, communities, and our economy. H.171 takes monumental steps towards reforming our child care system, investing in our future, and supporting the next generation of Vermonters. Not only does H.171 make child care more affordable, it removes barriers to access, ensures fair wages for providers, establishes workforce development programs, and creates a study to identify future revenue sources for a more deeply subsidized universal childcare system.

By increasing access and affordability for Vermont's families, we help parents stay employed and contribute to their local economies. By increasing wages for child care professionals, we can support and grow our workforce of early care and learning teachers. Prioritizing the development of our children gives our youngest Vermonters a head start to success.

Task Force to Implement Pupil Weighting Factors

In 2019, a team of UVM-led researchers delivered an extensive report on Vermont's "weights," the numeric factors used to account for the varying costs of educating different categories of students – for example, English learners or economically disadvantaged students. S.13 establishes a task force that will work over the summer to develop an implementation plan, a specific roadmap the legislature will use next session in considering how to integrate the new recommended weights. The weights

have a significant impact on how we calculate equalized pupils, which in turn impacts taxing capacity from district to district.

Business & Workforce Grant Programs Launched

To get relief to Vermonters quickly, the legislature passed H.315 in early April, a \$97.5 million pandemic relief bill that invested federal funds before the end of the session to jumpstart the state's recovery. This bill created \$10.5 million in Economic Recovery Bridge Grants, targeting new and small businesses not eligible for assistance initially. H.315 also allocated \$500,000 to the EMBRACE Grants for Micro Business program, providing up to \$5,000 to low and moderate-income Vermonters with businesses under 5 employees and less than \$25,000 in annual revenue. Finally, \$8.2 million was approved for the Vermont State Colleges, UVM and VSAC to provide up to two free classes to adult Vermonters looking to boost job skills or change careers, to all 2020 and 2021 high-school grads, and to train more LPNs.

Safe, Affordable & Accessible Transportation

Transportation is something most people don't think about until it's not working, costs too much, is unsafe, or not dependable. But having safe, affordable, accessible, timely transportation and connecting infrastructure underpins nearly every aspect of daily modern life. This year's Transportation Bill (H.433) and FY22 Budget (H.439) appropriate millions of dollars to maintaining safety and improving critical infrastructure like federal, state and town-owned highways, bridges and culverts. Financial support is also set aside to facilitate the forthcoming New York City-Burlington rail service, to ensure the long-term maintenance of the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail, and to support more than 40 bike and pedestrian projects. And for those who can't drive, bike or walk their way from "point A to point B," various public transit initiatives have been set in place, including making "Zero Fare" on buses continue through June 2022.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Rep. Jana Brown
jbrown@leg.state.vt.us
www.janabrownforvt.com
FB @janabrownforstaterep
802-999-4333