

Rep. Laura Sibilias's 2023 Town Meeting Report

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FY23 BUDGET ADJUSTMENT The House and Senate approved [H.145](#) the FY 2023 budget adjustment bill. Highlights include investments in housing, broadband and IT improvements. A Rural Caucus priority has been included: \$3 million for a Rural Infrastructure Assistance Program, to help towns “identify priority projects, submit applications, and then actively manage projects.

FY 24 BUDGET The House has started work on the [Fiscal Year 2024 budget](#). Vermont is seeing substantial revenue growth, largely due to federal pandemic stimulus and recovery dollars. Policymakers are working to use one-time funds to leverage federal funds for roads, bridges and other infrastructure under Congress’ Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. Other targeted investments under consideration are in housing, broadband expansion and clean energy.

S.5 AFFORDABLE HEAT ACT According to the Scott Administration’s Public Service Department, Vermonters are paying up to \$2.00 more per gallon for fossil fuels than they were in 2021. Pricing of fossil fuels is unregulated and determined in the global marketplace. Vermonters with the means to do so are getting rid of or significantly reducing fossil fuels delivered by their (often small local) fossil fuel dealer. Vermonters who can afford to are investing in weatherizing, efficiency, using biofuel blends or adding electric heat pumps to their current heating and cooling systems. Not all Vermonters can access these clean heat measures to save money by reducing fossil fuel usage. [S.5](#) requires Vermont heating fossil fuel importers to deliver or help pay for cleaner heat options -- in particular for lower and middle income Vermonters -- especially solutions that cut costs over time, like weatherization, heat pumps, and advanced wood heat. A similar standard for electricity has been in place in Vermont since 2015.

UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS The House Agriculture, Food Resiliency, and Forestry Committee passed [H.165](#) to make permanent Universal school meals, where schools in Vermont make school breakfast and lunch available to all students at no charge. The 30 million dollar price tag may be proposed to come off the top of the education fund.

HOUSING Senator Kesha Ram Hinsdale has pulled together housing initiatives with and without Act 250 changes from Rep. Seth Bongartz and Rep. Katherine Sims bills and worked with her Senate Commerce Committee to add in additional elements. [S.100, the housing opportunities made for everyone HOME bill](#), will have a bumpy ride through the legislature as environmental and housing advocates battle to keep or remove language in the bill.

PAID FAMILY & MEDICAL LEAVE INSURANCE [H.66](#), Family Medical Leave Insurance Bill has passed out of the General & Housing Committee and if passed by the entire body would provide up to 12 weeks of wage replacement for Vermonters that need to take off from work for family and medical reasons such as illness, the birth of a child, or to care for a family member with a serious health condition. It is proposed to be paid for with a shared payroll tax of .55.

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PROPERTY APPRAISALS A town wide reappraisal is required when a town's grand list falls below 85 percent of fair market value or rises above 115 percent of fair market value. Currently, 2/3 of Vermont's towns require reappraisals. Many towns are struggling with securing the needed workforce to perform those appraisals. [The House Ways & Means Committee is working on a bill](#) to move to a consistent statewide system for property appraisals. The intent is to relieve pressure on municipalities to manage appraisals with limited resources.

PUBLIC FUNDING OF RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS Vermont's current school choice policies are in conflict with the Vermont Constitution after the Carson v. Makin decision ruled Maine's current policy - similar to Vermont's, was violating the U.S. Constitution. The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that school choice is not required to be offered, but if it is, parents can not be prevented from making a religious choice under the First Amendment. The Vermont Constitution says that Vermonters can not be forced to support religion with their tax dollars. Vermont is now using all Vermonters public dollars to pay for religious schools for Vermonters who have school choice. The State Board of Education is now trying to require religious schools to attest that they will not discriminate in order to access public funds. Last month two religious schools refused to attest to the State Board requirement.

CHILD CARE & EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION The Senate has proposed [S.56](#) - an act relating to child-care and early childhood education. Currently Vermont has universal pre-k, this allows children ages 3-5 to attend pre-k for 10 hours per week either in a public or private institution and is paid by tax dollars. The bill proposes two things, 1) creation of a deputy secretary position in the Agency of Education, and 2) changes the requirements/regulations from being public or private for 3-5 year old's to having it be only publicly funded for 4-5 year old's in public institutions. This requires elementary schools to either create a pre-k program or tuition students out.

K-12 SCHOOL CHOICE: Bills that would change the way students in districts without an elementary or high school go to school have been introduced in the House and Senate. Were the bills to pass, the town tuition (also known as school choice) would transition to a designation process. If a district does not maintain an elementary or high school, they would designate up to three schools for students to attend. Designated schools are defined as 1) a public school in Vermont, 2) a public school outside of Vermont, or 3) an eligible independent school. An independent school becomes eligible if it meets three out of four criteria for public funding.

The current prevalent position appears to be to wait to see what the courts will do. That follows with the past prevalence to wait and see. Carson and Brigham resulted from wait and see.

ONGOING DISTRICT DISCUSSIONS: Community information and input sessions have been occurring related to public funding of religious institutions and the ramifications for school choice. Please monitor my website for additional forums www.laurasibiliavt.com