



Washington County Rep. Tony Klein Gives Us a Legislative

Greetings!

If there are other bills and issues that you would like information on or need more details on any of the above legislation please feel free to contact me. I am easily reached by cell phone at 802 793 6032 or by e-mail at twk@tonyklein.com.

Wrap Up Continued from June

Health Care: S.88

Everyone knows that the health care system needs to change. Insurance coverage is too expensive or insufficient for many, drug costs are too high, and hospital costs can bankrupt a family. Federal health care reform will help, but... is it enough? How do we make sure Vermont's health care system reflects our care for each other and strengthens our communities? S.88 answers this question in two ways.

First, it moves us toward a single system of health care, by authorizing Vermont's health care reform commission to hire one or more consultants to produce at least three such designs. One must be a single-payer option (meaning publicly financed and government-administered), and one must be a public option (meaning that you can choose between private insurance and a government-run plan). Every design must take into consideration federal reforms and meet a list of principles and goals that stress fairness, equitable and sustainable financing, and equal access for all.

For example, all Vermonters should have access to comprehensive, quality health care. We should be able to choose our primary care providers. The health care system should continually improve and its leaders should continually eliminate unnecessary costs. And the financing of health care must be fair, sustainable, shared equitably, and adequate to cover costs.

But this in itself is not enough. Every developed country in the world, whether single- or multi-payer, publicly or privately run, faces unsustainable increases in costs. Therefore S.88 also furthers Vermont's ongoing reform efforts, because improving the way health care is delivered and reducing costs are key to building strong communities.

The Blueprint for Health, at the center of our reform efforts, organizes care around the patient and his/her primary care provider, who might be a family doctor, nurse practitioner, gynecologist or someone else. These are supported by a "community health team" that might include a nurse, nutritionist, behavior specialist, or other specialist. These people together make up the patient's "medical home" and work together, supported by electronic health records, to keep the patient healthy. Instead of only getting paid per procedure, the participating practice also gets a per-member-per-month fee to support its work—and this model has been proven to lower costs by reducing emergency room visits and hospital admissions. S.88 furthers statewide expansion of the Blueprint.

Investing in the future, S.88 also provides for pilot projects to manage costs at a regional level. It also limits increases in hospital spending and directs a workgroup to address the shortage of primary care providers,

Finally, it says that if the federal government does not release to the states the information it will be collecting from pharmaceutical companies about free drug samples given to physicians, then the companies must provide that same information to Vermont's Attorney General. And, because people choose lower-calorie items when they know the calories, S.88 requires fast-food chains to post the number of calories on their menus and menu boards. This information will allow people to make healthier choices and help reduce obesity and its attendant health and cost issues.

Texting

Pretty nearly everybody agrees texting should be banned while driving. The Senate passed a bill which specifically made it illegal for any person to engage in texting while operating a moving motor vehicle on a highway. Texting is defined as "the reading or the manual composing or sending of electronic communications including text messages, instant messages, or e-mails using a portable electronic device." This does not include use of global positioning or navigation system. Penalties for texting are \$100.00 for the first offense and two points on your license, and \$250.00 and five points for the second offense and any subsequent offense. This ban applies to all drivers.

When the bill came to the House, additional provisions were added, to protect our young drivers. We banned the use of any portable electronic device while operating a moving vehicle on a driveway for drivers under 18. Additionally, while wearing a safety belt is the law for everybody, now police may stop a car driven by someone under 18 if it appears the driver is not wearing a seatbelt.

Judicial Restructuring:

Access to Justice and Savings Achieved

Last year, we informed the Judiciary that it would need to deliver \$1 million in savings in the FY 11 budget. This year we delivered those savings together with a "unified judiciary" that has been in the works for 36 years.

In 1974 the Vermont Constitution was amended to provide the Supreme Court with management of all the state's courts. Statutory amendments creating a truly unified judiciary system passed the House in 1977. Senate inaction, however, left the Supreme Court with a fragmented rather than a unified judiciary.

Our judicial restructuring bill consolidates the existing Family, district, superior, environmental and probate courts in to a single Unified Superior Court with family, criminal, civil, environmental and probate divisions. We have statutorily required that courts will continue to operate in all 14 of our counties. And we consolidate all court staff as state employees under the management of the court administrator.

This important government efficiency measure saves \$1 million in the general fund AND an additional \$1.2 million in property taxes (through county budget savings); it allows the court to "buy-back" most (but not all) of the existing court closures. Most importantly, it gives the Supreme Court the tools it needs to manage the entire judicial system efficiently.

Transportation

Vermont's road conditions rank close to the bottom in the nation. Commuters and tourist alike experience this fact each day. The national infrastructure is poor at best, dangerous at worst. Washington DC understands the investment in infrastructure results in better roads and the funds generated will put people to work. An investment in jobs is money well spent. Improvements bring tourists to this state and move them around the state.

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Vermont will invest almost \$600 million on transportation projects in fiscal year 2011. This is the largest transportation budget in Vermont history. A combination of funds from bonding, taxes, balance of stimulus and grants attribute to this record amount. Municipals received a much needed increase (\$3.5 million increase) in paving and structures program grants. VT rail received several of the federal complete grants which will update the Vermonter rail line in mid VT. The Western Corridor rail grant was not obtained but, the state will be reapplying in the future as opportunities open.

Bridges in Vermont continue to receive a hearty investment however; the number of bridges in need of significant work is large and growing. We will need to be mindful of the problem(s) and be aware it will require many years of investment with strong oversight. It is good news indeed that Vermont be able to invest in infrastructure. There is little doubt of the positive impact highway projects has on Vermont's employment.

A Stronger Vermont Economy

Our actions will create jobs and more broadband throughout Vermont. Namely, we wrote new policy and funded critical projects. Our jobs bill invests almost \$9 million in federal stimulus funds in broadband, workforce training, access to capital, agriculture, and many worthwhile projects.

Our new policies make business and commerce more equitable and operate more efficiently. This includes a solution for the unemployment insurance trust fund, strengthened rights for condo-owners and others in home associations, fair labor laws that ensure proper classification of employees for workers' compensation, strengthening of the VT Seal of Quality, and support for Farm-to-Plate grants and the Buy Local movement.

Additionally, merchants will be helped by being able to decide for themselves whether to accept credit cards for purchases under \$10, responding to the fact that they often lose money on small credit card transactions due to high credit card fees. Non-profits will be strengthened by prohibiting discrimination against drivers who are volunteers. Furthermore, we responded to concerns from Ben & Jerry's and Vermont Businesses for Social Responsibility to create a new structure for businesses to choose to define their bottom-line-results. This would allow them to not only maximize profits, but also make business decisions based on the greater social good through the designation of Benefit Corporations.

As our economy struggles to rebound, we have set in place many of these measures to put Vermonters back to work, strengthen our telecommunications infrastructure, and help businesses thrive in Vermont.

Unemployment Insurance

We have known since January, 2009 that our Unemployment Insurance Trust Fund would run out of money by early in 2010. We have been working since then to find a workable solution.

The primary cause of the imbalance is that the premiums paid by employers has not changed since 1983, while our benefits to unemployed workers has slowly risen along with our average wage. In good times with low unemployment, this was not a problem, but when the current recession hit with full force, the fund was rapidly depleted.

Business interests said they could not afford to pay the full cost of bringing the fund back, and labor interests said that it is unfair to ask laid-off workers to suffer cuts to benefits that scarcely cover basic needs. Unable to agree in 2009, we made a slight upward adjustment to the "taxable wage base" on which premiums are paid, moving from \$8,000 to \$10,000. This helped to stanch the bleeding, but it was only a temporary relief.

This winter, after long negotiations between competing interests, a compromise was reluctantly agreed to by all sides. The deal called for some reductions in benefits (a one-week waiting period, some exclusions for serious misconduct, some recalculations of eligibility and duration of benefits), though the greater burden will be carried by employers. We raised the taxable wage base to \$13,000 in 2011 and to \$16,000 in 2012.

Many measures in the compromise will be favorably adjusted when the trust fund regains solvency and full adequacy, but we will not get there for at least five years.

Teacher's Retirement, investing in our future

There is a keen awareness that the strengths of our communities are vastly dependent on the quality of our schools. Our teachers are an integral part of the direction in which our youth are heading. They are competing globally. With collaboration between the administration, NEA and the legislature, teacher's retirement was under keen scrutiny for savings with teachers' interests in mind. The bill will result in savings to the state General Fund in FY1 2011, more than that in each successive year, and an additional \$85 million in taxpayer savings over the next three decades regarding health benefits for retired teachers.

At the same time, the benefit structure of the system is enhanced. Teachers will be able to accrue as much as 60% of their average final compensation rather than the current 50 % limit. Teachers will be able, with extra teaching years, to retire with a health benefit for their spouses as well as for themselves, rather than a benefit just for themselves. There are several policies in play here. First, there is no intrusion into the benefits of current retirees. Secondly, the basic structure of the system remains a defined benefit pension and not a defined contribution system. Thirdly, the Education Fund is left without any additional burden. Fourth, there is a recommendation in the bill that the state meets its annual obligation to this system on an ongoing basis. It does this without any imposition on the property taxpayer.

Supporting Our National Guard

We, as legislators, commend the 1,500 Vermonters from across the Green Mountain State deployed in Afghanistan and have made every attempt to ensure our servicemen and women do not have to worry about their families back home while they serve our nation overseas.

The House and Senate have passed the Military Parents' Rights Act, which protects the parental rights of military members when they are absent from their children's lives due to orders. Swift mobilization can be disruptive to custody arrangements, sometimes causing military parents to lose access to their children because of deployment. The bill expedites court processes and custody hearings, requires the non-deploying parent to facilitate contact between the child and deployed parent, and stipulates that a permanent loss of custody cannot be based solely on deployment.

It is important to the legislature that deployed Guard members be able to focus on completing their mission and returning safely to their families and communities. **If you have a loved one deployed overseas and need financial or resource assistance, please call the Vermont Veteran and Family Outreach 24-hour hotline: (888) 607-8773.**