

# TOWN MEETING REPORT

## Representative Thomas Bock



*“We're halfway through the 2022 legislative session! We've passed some significant legislation in these first two months and remain committed to rebuilding Vermont's economy and making continued progress on the interconnected challenges of workforce, housing, and childcare.*

*With funds from the federal American Rescue Plan Act and Infrastructure and Jobs bill, Vermont again has a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make consequential investments that will transform the future of our state. As always, feel free to email me for more information on these and other issues. Your feedback is critical to our work.” - Tom*

### **Covid Update for Schools**

Schools have been operating under advisory guidance from the Agency of Education with authority for school districts to set their own requirements. The most recent AOE guidance, that schools should require universal indoor masking for all students and staff, is just about to expire.

AOE now recommends that “masks should no longer be required for all those eligible for vaccination when the vaccination rate among students is equal to or greater than 80% of the school's currently eligible population.”

Vaccination clinics at schools remain an ongoing initiative, as well as the Test-to-Home program in which close contact students are given home rapid tests after a classroom exposure.

### **Something For the Young & Old**

The Vermont House has approved a \$50 million tax cut package that would provide \$1,200 per child to most families with kids of age 6 and under, the Vermont version of the now-expired federal child tax credit. H.510 would benefit about 50,000 children. The bill also increases the amount of tax-exempt Social Security for middle-income seniors. Since 2018, Vermont has exempted SS income from taxation for single taxpayers with Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) below \$45,000 and for married filers with AGI below \$60,000. That exemption is expanded under H.510 by \$5,000 for both sets of filers.

### **Prop 5: Freedom of Choice Act**

In 2019, the Vermont General Assembly passed H.57, which with the Governor's signature became the Freedom of Choice Act in an effort to codify our long-standing practice of safe, legal access to reproductive health care, including abortion. As before 2019, private healthcare providers are not obligated to participate in any abortion practice.

With support for Roe eroding in the U.S. Supreme Court and growing concerns about diminishing federal protections, the State Senate had introduced the Reproductive Liberty Amendment, triggering a 4-year process to enactment that would enshrine existing protections in the state Constitution. After passage in 2019, and again this year, as required, it will now go before the voters, in the November 2022 general election.

If it succeeds, Vermont will become the first state in the nation to explicitly protect reproductive rights in its constitution.

### **Pension Stabilization Package**

The Pension Funding Task Force has announced an agreement to stabilize the state employee and teacher pension fund. To address the \$4.5 billion pension liability, employees have agreed to benefit reductions and higher contributions, while the legislature will make a one-time \$200 million contribution to pay down the debts plus 50% of general fund surpluses. This should save the taxpayers \$2 billion in the upcoming years. This is still a work in progress. Stay tuned.

## Gun Safety Bill S.30

The legislature made strides towards improving public safety by passing S.30 on a vote of 91-53. This bill prohibits guns in hospitals, affirms a judge's ability to order a defendant to relinquish their firearms while a relief from abuse order is in effect, and closes the "Charleston Loophole."

Currently in Vermont, someone can purchase a firearm even though their background check had not been completed within the three days allowed. This resulted in 28 firearms being sold over the last two years to people who were ineligible to own guns. The Governor, who very recently vetoed this bill, and the Legislature are working on a compromise.

### Redrawing Legislative Districts

The Legislative Apportionment Board is currently evaluating with legislators and Boards of Civil Authority, the reapportioning of State House and Senate districts to ensure that Vermonters have equal representation in the General Assembly.

This boils down to dividing the state's population of 643,050 by the 150 House seats and redrawing into districts of ideally 4,287 population. As population drops in some parts of the state and rises in others, changes must be made. The redistricting plan will be finalized and enacted to take effect this election season.

### Addressing Climate Change

Vermont's Global Warming Solutions Act requires a 40% reduction in emissions by the end of the decade. More than 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of Vermont's climate pollution comes from fossil fuels heating our buildings and water. The **Clean Heat Standard (CHS)** requires fuel companies to lower greenhouse gas emissions over time by delivering a range of clean heat alternatives- heat pumps, weatherization, advanced wood heating, biofuels— that reduce fossil fuel consumption. The CHS puts Vermont on a sustainable path to achieve those reduction goals.

As a rural state, Vermonters drive a lot, resulting in 40% of carbon emissions. The **Transportation Innovation Act** proposes millions in investments for electric vehicle charging equipment grants; incentives for electric vehicles, buses, eBikes, ATVs and snowmobiles; and funding for transportation programs for lower income Vermonters. Federal funds, requiring a state match, will make these incentives possible.

### **GOOD TO KNOW . . . . .**

- ✓ Thanks to a bill passed in 2020, **Vermont's minimum wage** increased from \$11.74 to \$12.55 on January 1<sup>st</sup> and, in following years, will increase by 5% or inflation rate, whichever is smaller.
- ✓ **Universal Vote-by-Mail** was created to make voting easier for Vermonters. This system will send out ballots before the November 2022 election.
- ✓ Vermont's **Retail Cannabis Industry** begins October 1, 2022 when licenses for retail sales will be issued by the Cannabis Control Board. Gov. Scott allowed it to become law without his signature in October 2020.
- ✓ **Progress on Vermont's Housing Shortage** is being made this year to address the statewide housing shortage with federal relief funding to speed the production of new or rehabilitated housing.
- ✓ **Adoption Laws** are being updated which would open all adoption records in the state unless a birth parent has specifically requested that they be closed.
- ✓ The **Forest Future Strategic Roadmap** bill will determine where we can make smart investments that strengthen, promote, and protect this important part of our economy,
- ✓ **Vermont's Taxpayer Advocate**, an independent entity within the Dept. of Taxes, offers free guidance to taxpayers with problems they are unable to resolve. Contact them [here](#).
- ✓ Starting in 2022, **certain exotic animal parts and products can no longer be sold** in Vermont. Restrictions and exceptions are detailed in [Act 169](#).

### Developing a Vibrant Workforce

Workforce development is one of our legislative priorities this year. With 25,000 job openings in Vermont and an unemployment rate of just 2.5%, we're trying to identify and remove the barriers that are preventing people from working or returning to work by offering opportunities for Vermonters to gain post-secondary credentials and degrees of value, which increase earning potential. We continue to support scholarships and grants that make these opportunities affordable for all Vermonters. We're also working with employers to identify their long-term workforce needs.

### **Health Insurance Cost Savings . . .**

*Vermonters have an opportunity to see significant savings on their health insurance costs because of extended subsidies under the federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). Those enrolled in the individual market can roll over to Vermont Health Connect with no change in benefits and gain the advantage of federal subsidies.*

*Check out [Vermont Health Connect](#) to learn more about potential savings.*