

# 2023 Town Meeting Report

## Rep. Kathleen James | Rep. Seth Bongartz

Bennington-4: Arlington | Manchester | Sandgate | Sunderland



We're halfway through the 2023 legislative session! Our work officially began on January 4, when members were sworn in at the start of the two-year biennium. Kath is serving as Assistant Majority Leader and ranking member of the House General and Housing Committee. Seth is serving as ranking member of the House Environment and Energy Committee. We've started work on some significant legislation in these first two months, and this report provides highlights. We hope you'll join us at our constituent coffee hours, which we're holding regularly across the district and on Zoom. See times and dates on the back page, as well as our contact information.



### 2023–2024 LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

The legislature is tackling a wide range of issues during this biennium. While many of these challenges can't be solved in a single session, priorities include:

- Passing and maintaining a fiscally responsible, balanced state budget that supports Vermonters and communities in all 14 counties.
- Creating affordable housing stock for Vermont's working families, and combating homelessness statewide, by modernizing zoning laws and increasing funding for construction.
- Supporting business stability and growth in all corners of Vermont. Modernizing infrastructure of rural downtowns to support vibrant and resilient communities, including sewer and wastewater, broadband and technical assistance.
- Investing in the childcare system to increase access, affordability and quality; increasing wages to improve retention and build a stable early education workforce. Launching a comprehensive family and medical leave insurance program.
- Enacting forward-looking, inclusive strategies to combat climate change, prepare for severe weather patterns and transition to a sustainable way of life, while centering the needs of rural, low- and moderate-income Vermonters.
- Supporting our preK–12 school system, with its successful blend of public and independent schools. Designing a higher education system that attracts and retains young people and prepares them for good paying, 21<sup>st</sup> century careers, including the skilled trades. Providing universal, free school meals to all K–12 students.
- Increasing access to health care, mental health and substance use disorder treatment services and making them more affordable.

This is far from a comprehensive list. With 150 members and 13 standing committees, the House can accomplish a lot between now and the end of the biennium in spring 2024.

### HOUSING AT THE STATE and LOCAL LEVEL

In the Vermont House of Representatives, two key committees work on housing. Environment and Energy (where Seth is ranking member) looks at this critical issue through the lens of land use and zoning, while the General and Housing Committee (where Kath is ranking member) considers programs that expand housing access and construction, as well as landlord-tenant laws.

Seth worked hard this fall with a diverse group of experts to develop and introduce H.68, a housing bill that would remove state and municipal regulatory barriers for fair zoning and housing affordability. As often happens in the statehouse, Seth's bill has been rolled into S.100, a sweeping omnibus housing bill that's on the move in the Senate and will reach the House in late March.

Meanwhile, Kath's committee is taking extensive testimony on housing programs like the Vermont Housing Improvement Program ([VHIP](#)), VHIP's related program to promote the creation of Accessory Dwelling Units ([ADUs](#)) and the Missing [Middle-Income Home Ownership](#) Development Program. Locally, we've both been appointed to the Manchester Housing Task Force.

### BUILDING A BALANCED BUDGET FOR FY24

The House is working on the next Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 budget, which covers state government and its community partner organizations from July 1, 2023 to June 30, 2024. The Appropriations Committee expects to present its proposed budget to the full House for discussion later in March. We are seeing substantial revenue growth this year, largely due to the impact of federal pandemic stimulus and recovery dollars. Our challenge is to make strategic use of one-time funds to meet state priorities. Those priorities include leveraging federal funds to support improvements in roads, bridges and other infrastructure needs under Congress' Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (passed last year). Other targeted statewide priorities are those that will deliver long-term dividends for Vermonters including investments in housing, broadband expansion,



*The People's House in winter (iStock: Erika Mitchell)*

workforce training, clean energy and childcare. As is our Vermont tradition, it will be a balanced budget.

### EDUCATION FUNDING & PROPERTY APPRAISALS

Vermonters all know how much the real estate market has fluctuated in recent years—the rise in property values has been historic. The Committee on Ways & Means has spent the first few months of this legislative session looking at a wide range of ways to bring this system into alignment. The committee has heard testimony on innovative solutions, including moving away from funding education with property taxes, and moving to a consistent statewide system for property appraisals. The intent of a more consistent system is to avoid large changes in values that catch property owners by surprise, and to relieve pressure on municipalities to manage appraisals with limited resources. The committee is also looking at ways to recategorize non-homestead property values to get a better sense of how these properties are used. Currently the non-homestead property category includes everything from second homes to businesses to industrial use.

### FAMILY AND MEDICAL LEAVE INSURANCE

This year's version of Paid Family and Medical Leave Insurance, [H.66](#), as recently passed out of the General and Housing Committee, is very different from the bill passed in the House three years ago. H.66 contains three main provisions of equal importance: job protection, wage replacement while on leave (up to the state average wage), and ample leave time. The proposed benefit is portable; it follows the employee rather than remaining with the employer.

Paid leave covers varying periods of leave time for an employee or family member's serious health conditions, or recovery from serious health conditions; miscarriage; residential treatment for substance use disorder; childbirth and child bonding; military exigency, which allows a servicemember or their family to prepare for active duty; and bereavement. The bill also covers "safe leave" for medical care, counseling, or social or legal services, when an employee or family member is a victim of domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking.

Under the bill, employers and employees would share the insurance premium costs to provide paid leave benefits equally through small payroll contributions, ensuring a valuable benefit at a low predictable cost to employers. As currently drafted, employers (including small businesses) would pay

less than 0.27% of payroll, up to a cap. The bill is currently under consideration in the House Ways & Means committee and will change as it moves through the legislative process. Stay tuned!

### PUBLIC DOLLARS TO INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

Vermont has a unique education landscape in that 44 of its 114 school districts do not operate a public school for some grade levels. In our district, Sunderland, Sandgate and Manchester are non-operating with regards to high school. Instead, we pay tuition to the high school of the family's choice. This tuition system has been in place locally for nearly 200 years.

Last year, in *Carson vs. Makin*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that states that offer transferable tuition—school choice—cannot deny students using state dollars the right to attend religious schools. Meanwhile, the Compelled Support Clause in Vermont's Constitution, as interpreted by the Vermont Supreme Court, says that a school district may pay public tuition dollars to a religious school only if there are safeguards against state money being used for religious worship or instruction.

The Education Committee is working on a bill that requires that schools receiving public dollars would have to demonstrate a commitment to non-discrimination against any of the classes of individuals protected by federal and state law, such as the LGBTQ community. This balanced response is supported by the vast majority of Vermont's independent schools. We are following closely.

### CONSTITUENT COFFEE HOURS

We host coffee hours throughout the legislative session, which runs from January through May. It's a great way to ask questions, raise concerns and stay informed! All meetings are held on Saturdays from 9 to 10:30 am. For a Zoom link, email Kath ([KJames@leg.state.vt.us](mailto:KJames@leg.state.vt.us)) at least 30 minutes prior.

We've met so far at Charlie's Coffeehouse, Wayside and online. Here's the schedule for the remainder of the session: **March 4** (Bonnie and Clyde's), **March 18** (Zoom), **April 1** (Charlie's Coffee House), **May 13** (Wayside), **May 20** (Zoom) and **June 3** (Bonnie and Clyde's). During the session, we're in Montpelier every Tuesday through Friday and home on weekends and Mondays. Stay in touch!

## HOW TO CONTACT US

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To see our voting records, read bills, and watch floor debates and committee hearings, go to: [legislature.vermont.gov](http://legislature.vermont.gov).