



# Town Meeting Legislative Report

**Sen. Nader Hashim & Sen. Wendy Harrison**

**March 2023 - Windham District**

## Senator Hashim

Dummerston

## Senator Harrison

Brattleboro

Hello Windham County! It feels great to be back in Montpelier again, and I am enjoying every minute of my service. I am truly humbled to be up here representing our corner of Vermont. I am currently serving as the vice-chair of the Judiciary Committee in the morning, and as a member of the Education Committee in the afternoon.

I describe the Judiciary Committee as the place where we handle either highly controversial topics, such as reproductive rights, firearms, and criminal law, to the more mundane but still important topics like powers of attorney, real estate transfers, and estate administration.

One of my top priorities before entering this committee was to help address the backlog of cases both in the criminal and civil divisions. We're still doing the work within two different bills to reduce the number of hearings that arise in order to shorten the amount of time people spend litigating, especially within the youthful offender program, which is an important program but has led to an increase in the court backlog.

Some of the other bills we've voted out involve prohibiting law enforcement from using deception on juveniles in custody, prohibiting paramilitary training camps, creating a state law that prohibits straw man purchases of firearms, and prohibiting defacing serial numbers on firearms.

For those who may not know, a straw man purchase is when an individual who is disqualified from purchasing a firearm convinces someone else to purchase a firearm for them, typically in exchange for drugs.

Currently, we are deliberating creating restrictions on hospital liens on patients due to medical debt, removing the exemption for clergy to report child abuse, working to expand bed capacity for high acuity mental health cases, and creating a Shield Law that will protect people who come to Vermont to access reproductive healthcare or contraceptives.

In my afternoon committee on education, we've been covering a wide range of topics. Some of the major priorities include:

1. School construction, including PCB remediation
2. Universal school meals

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I've thoroughly enjoyed my first two months in the Vermont Senate. I'm serving as Clerk of the Economic Development, Housing and General Affairs Committee and Vice-Chair of the Institutions Committee. There are five members of each committee so I've gotten to know my committee members well. Of the 30-member Senate, 10 of us are new.

**In the Economic Development Committee**, we spent the vast majority of our time on a major housing bill. We heard testimony from frustrated builders, renters, homebuyers, towns, employers, and financial institutions. The bill refines effective pilot programs and strengthens long-standing partners. We finalized and unanimously voted out S.100, **Housing Opportunities Made for Everyone**, a housing omnibus bill with wide-ranging goals.

The bill includes changes to local zoning regulations, Act 250 processes, creation of rental and ownership homes, fair housing enforcement, fire codes, and state-sponsored programs.

Municipalities would be required to allow duplexes wherever single-family homes are allowed. In areas served by municipal water *and* sewer, 4-unit multi dwelling units would be allowed and density would be at least 4 units per acre. Parking requirements could not be more than 1 space per dwelling unit in most cases. A builder or developer could provide more than 1 space, but the municipality would be able to *require no more than* 1 per unit (or 1.5 in certain circumstances). These provisions are meant to encourage additional housing in areas already developed to address the severe housing shortage while keeping the special character of Vermont.

Similarly, the bill proposes adjustments to the Act 250 process and threshold to allow more infill development and regulate housing developments at 25 units versus 10 units. To reduce duplicate permitting, the Natural Resources Board could allow Towns to use local development regulations and processes to provide the same level of environmental protection as Act 250. The bill is now in the Natural Resources Committee which will review these aspects of the bill.

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Regarding school construction, we have not built a new school in this state in over 20 years. There was also a moratorium put in place back in 2007 which we are considering to repeal as part of our construction plan. We've held conversations with other states, such as Rhode Island, who've successfully addressed their infrastructure issues. And we've also had conversations with our new treasurer, Mike Pieciak, about bonding for municipalities and different pathways we can take to fund school construction and renovation.

Right now we are working on a bill that is creating a strategic plan and an additional group in the Agency of Education to address this construction issue, and it's likely going to be the largest committee bill that will take up most of our time. When it comes to updating or building new schools the rest of the committee expressed bipartisan support for this issue.

Second, I've learned that universal school meals have had a significantly positive impact on students in Vermont. It's also been a great benefit for our local farmers who are provided with a reliable source of income that comes from the schools they work with. The committee is largely in agreement about universal school meals, but we are exploring the different ways in which we can pay for it.

Another topic of conversation we've had in the Education Committee has to do with the declining test scores in Vermont, and across the country. Statistically, our students do perform better than many other states. However, these scores have been declining since before COVID. One of the points I regularly interject into our conversations about test scores is that instead of trying to pick apart the nuances of curriculum or test administration, we really should be focusing more on basic needs. In other words, we can't expect our children to perform well in school if they are hungry, or are coming from homes that aren't safe, or if their schools are deteriorating.

I want to conclude by stating there are other committees that are also working heavily on addressing the housing crisis, investing in childcare, and reducing our carbon emissions.

In the statehouse we have to rely heavily on our senate colleagues when it comes to sharing information, plans, and goals for different sectors of our government. This biennium has seen the largest number of new legislators in the state's history; 80 of us are brand new among the 180 total seats. Despite the challenges that accompany such a large contingency of new legislators, I see that new members in both the House and Senate are hitting the ground running and working well together. I remain a firm believer that it's important to collaborate with the House, and I continue to build relationships in both chambers in order to learn from people who have different life experiences than me and to also more effectively strategize bill movement.

Thank you all again for the opportunity to serve you in Montpelier! It's only been two months so far, but I've enjoyed every minute of it.

*Nader Hashim*



The HOME bill proposes \$2.5 million for eviction rescue funding to landlords, \$200,000 to home sharing throughout the State, \$500,000 for assistance to mobile homes and mobile home park infrastructure, formalizes the Missing Middle Homeownership Development Program and funds it at \$20 million, creates a \$20 million Rental Housing Revolving Loan program, updates and provides \$20 million in funding for the Rental Housing Improvement program, and appropriates \$25 million to the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board to create new affordable housing.

The bill still has a long way to go, first through Senate committees and the Senate floor and then to the House. We've received a lot of support and I'm optimistic that this bill could be transformational and truly result in rental and ownership opportunities for current and future Vermonters. The policies and programs include Vermonters of all financial means while still protecting the rural nature and individual towns that make Vermont special.

Next up for the Economic Development Committee are bills proposing restrictions on vaping targeted toward children, economic development issues such as minimum wage updates, workplace discrimination and traditional economic development incentives for companies.

**The Institutions Committee** reviews and approves the two-year capital budget, which includes State buildings such as courthouses and correctional facilities. Like the General Fund, there is more than the usual amount of funds available because of the recent federal assistance. The House gets the first cut at the capital budget, so we'll start our formal review in a few weeks. In the meantime, we're getting testimony from the state agencies who administer the programs, which include water and sewer funding, historic and barn grants, county and other fairs, the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, forests and state parks.

Thanks!

*Wendy Harrison*

## The Affordable Heat Act

- The Affordable Heat Act was passed out successfully from the Senate on 3/2/2023. Both of us supported and voted yes on this bill.
- The AHA creates a structured plan that will be up for review in 2025. In order to take effect, it will have to be voted on by the legislature in that biennium.
- There are no new taxes in this bill, and nothing about it will increase costs for Vermonters.
- The purpose of the bill is to find a way to transition Vermonters in an affordable manner to cleaner, more efficient heating sources per the requirements of the Global Warming Solutions Act. No one will be obligated to change or switch their heating source.
- the Intent language includes " ...[the AHA] recognizes that affordable heating is essential for Vermonters. It shall enhance social equity by prioritizing customers with low income and moderate income and those households with the highest energy burdens."

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### JOINT MESSAGE TO VOTERS

We have hit the ground running in Montpelier, and even though we both come from very different backgrounds and experiences, we've brought our knowledge together to strongly support and represent Windham County. Although we are busy almost every moment of the day, we strategize to make sure Windham County gets the support it needs. We are both incredibly grateful to represent the significant diversity in Windham County, and look forward to continuing advocating for all of you!

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