

JAMES & BONGARTZ

STATE REPRESENTATIVES

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Office Hours

Reps. Kathleen James and Seth Bongartz are holding online office hours during the 2021 legislative session. Together, we represent the two-seat Bennington-4 district.

Office hours are via Zoom from 9 to 10:30 a.m. on the second Saturday of each month. To join us, email KJames@leg.state.vt.us at least 30 minutes prior to each meeting. Upcoming dates include:

- March 13**
- April 10**
- May 8**
- June 12**

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It’s an honor to serve as your State Representatives.

One year ago, Governor Phil Scott declared a state of emergency as the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in Vermont. Since then, the General Assembly has been meeting remotely, with legislators attending committee hearings and participating in floor debates via Zoom. Despite these challenges, the House and Senate are making steady progress on important policy goals, including:

- Creating an equitable COVID recovery plan that rebuilds the economy in all 14 counties
- Increasing affordable housing options for Vermont’s working families plus safe housing for people who are homeless



COVID RECOVERY

The House passed nearly \$80 million in new COVID-19 relief and recovery aid for Vermonters before its weeklong, mid-session break. H.315 provides critical assistance to working families and businesses struggling due to the pandemic. The relief package, which now heads to the Senate for consideration, includes funding for:

- \$10m in recovery grants for small businesses that were not eligible for any federal aid (PPP, EIDL)
- \$10m to create new housing for homeless Vermonters
- \$15m to improve indoor air quality of school buildings
- \$10m to repair trails and support outdoor recreation and tourism
- \$2.2m in rural broadband buildout and support for CUDs
- \$20m investment in our state pension and retirement system
- Plus stimulus checks for Reach Up families, support for mental health programs, funds for VT Farmers to Families Food Box program and Working Lands...

[Click here to read the bill.](#)

- Investing in childcare to improve access, affordability and quality
- Expanding broadband service to rural communities and “last mile” roads and regions for telehealth, education and remote work
- Crafting policies with a revised lens of racial and social equity

We work hard to build positive, productive relationships in the virtual statehouse—collaborating closely with each other, within our party and across the aisle to be effective and respected voices for Bennington-4. Our shared priority is advancing policies that will help our communities not only to recover from the pandemic, but to thrive.

Kath serves on the [House Education Committee](#), and last summer was appointed to the [Select Committee on the Future of Public Higher Education in Vermont](#), a statewide panel tasked with developing an action plan to transform the Vermont State Colleges. She also serves on the board of delegates and legislative advisory council of the [New England Board of Higher Education](#). Through NEBHE meetings and resources, she learns about shared challenges and innovative solutions from postsecondary institutions across the region.

Seth’s election in 2020 marks his third stint in the Vermont legislature, having served in the House from 1981 to 1985 and the Senate from 1987 to 1989. He’s been named to the [House Natural Resources Committee](#), where he can build on his experience as founder of the Manchester Community Land Trust and 18-year role as the visionary president of Hildene. He’s also been appointed to the [Legislative Committee on Administrative Rules \(LCAR\)](#), which provides oversight as state agencies develop detailed rules to implement statutes.

We are both active in several issues-oriented caucuses, rotating the meetings and keeping each other informed. These include the [Climate Solutions Caucus](#), a broad coalition of 80-plus legislators dedicated to advancing cost-effective and equitable energy policies to transition Vermont to a sustainable future. We’re deeply engaged in the [Tourism Caucus](#) and the [Rural Economic Development Working Group](#), while also following the important social and racial justice work of the [Social Equity Caucus](#).

Politics is mostly about policy. But it’s also about people. Through our committee and caucus work, our shared strategy is to identify and join teams of legislators — all of whom have different ideas and perspectives — to make progress together on tough issues that matter to Vermonters.

At our legislative pages, you can see every bill we’ve sponsored and our voting records. [Click here for Kath](#) and [here for Seth](#).



FY22 State Budget

House Appropriations is working on the FY2022 budget, which covers the programs of state government and its community partner organizations from July 1, 2021 to June 30, 2022. The committee is on target to present its proposed budget to the full House in the middle of March.

Balancing the extraordinary infusion of federal and state COVID relief revenues – funding that will not be sustained over time – while meeting the extraordinary need of Vermonters as they endure the pandemic are the prime challenges. The goal is to make strategic use of one-time funds to help Vermont “build back better.”

Since the early weeks of the pandemic, the COVID-related dollars flowing to Vermont from Washington have been substantial. As of mid-January 2021, the federal infusion equaled 20 percent of our state’s economy. It is estimated to reach as much as 30 percent.

As of December, approximately \$5 billion had come to Vermont, much passing directly to agencies and departments. Within this amount was the \$1.25 billion that became the Coronavirus Relief Fund (CRF), which the legislature had authority to appropriate. Funding flowed to businesses, schools, childcare, healthcare, farms, broadband and many other needs. Currently, \$6.3 million in CRF funding remains to be allocated, as we also await new rounds of relief aid from Congress.

Education Committee: Rep. James

We started our work by hearing updates from Vermont schools on their COVID-19 response plan, and how schools will continue to move all students forward into recovery. Since then, our work has been focused on the following legislation ([click here for a link to all bills](#)):

School Construction: Taking Stock & Studying Funding

Built decades ago, it’s no secret that many of Vermont’s school buildings are in dire need of repair. Committee bill DR 21-0782 would update building standards, conduct a statewide assessment, and study funding options. Vermont is the only state in New England without a school construction funding program; our program was suspended in 2007.

Early Literacy: Shoring Up the Foundation

Literacy is a foundational learning skill, and the work begins in the earliest grades. H.101 would allow groups of supervisory unions to work together to improve literacy teaching, provide coaching, measure outcomes, and ensure that students who struggle are identified and receive instruction from highly qualified instructors.

Education Funding: The Weighting Study

A December 2019 study conducted by UVM concluded that the way Vermont calculates the cost of educating certain categories of students (including low-income, English language learners, secondary and rural students) is outdated and inaccurate. We’ll be discussing how to implement the recommendations and provide more equitable funding.

Vermont State Colleges: A Critical Crossroads

Last year, the legislature passed Act 120, which created the Select Committee on the Future of Public Higher Education to address the urgent needs of the Vermont State Colleges. Working with the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), the committee delivered its [second report to the legislature](#) on February 12. The report urges the legislature to “act with urgency” in providing sufficient funding — over the next six fiscal years — to keep the state colleges stable while VSC commits to a [far-reaching restructuring plan](#).

Community Schools Demonstration Pilot Program

We’ll soon be voting on H.106, which proposes grant funding for eligible public schools to implement a “community schools” model. Community schools offer “wrap-around” services and programs in a targeted way to meet the needs of students and families around issues such as poverty, mental health, basic medical and dental care, and food and housing insecurity. Kath is the lead sponsor of H.106 and Seth is a co-sponsor.



Good news on property tax rates

Every year the legislature sets the education property tax rate in the “Yield Bill.” It’s a complicated formula based on school district budgets, the number of equalized pupils, and the balance needed in the Education Fund after other revenue is taken into account.

A letter from the Tax Department in December, based on now-outdated projections, pointed to significantly higher tax rates. But thanks to federal relief funds and direct stimulus payments to individuals, Vermont saw increased consumer spending that led to revenues far above and beyond expectations. Much of this spending happened online and Vermont has been well-poised to collect sales tax on those online sales because of recent legislation allowing us to collect taxes on such purchases sold into the state.

Additionally, proposed spending from school districts points to a lower increase in school budgets than anticipated. If this trend continues, the average education spending increase—which is what tax rates are based on—will be less than 1 percent. We will continue to work on final rates, but this is the latest in a series of signals that our education property tax rates are likely to be substantially lower than were predicted. The yield bill that was passed out of committee ([H.152](#)) will likely keep property taxes close to flat across the state.

Natural Resources Committee: Rep. Bongartz

The House Committee on Natural Resources, Fish & Wildlife considers matters relating to conservation and development of the state's water resources; conservation and development of lands; land resources; land use; geology; fish and wildlife; natural habitats; air quality, environmental permitting; climate change; scenery; and solid waste and toxic substances management ([click here for a link to all bills](#)):

Bringing Bottle Bill into 21st Century

Vermont’s beverage container and redemption law, the “Bottle Bill,” was enacted in 1973 to address roadside litter and increase recycling. It was last updated 30 years ago to add liquor bottles and containers of beer, wine coolers and carbonated beverages. After three decades, another update is needed to address the growing variety of beverage containers and rising litter and recycling needs. The update has three main parts. First, an increase in the deposit from \$.05 to \$.10. The nickel deposit has not changed in nearly 50 years. If the deposit had kept up with inflation, it would be closer to \$.30 today. Second, an expansion of the types of containers accepted, to include wine bottles, hard cider and non-carbonated drinks except for milk (plastic water bottles). It would increase the handling fee given for stores and redemption centers.

Protecting Water Quality & Wetlands

Water quality standards are the foundational tool that the state uses to restore and maintain the health and proper uses of its surface waters. These standards are codified in the Clean Water Act and approved by the federal EPA; they are used to assess the quality of water for drinking, swimming, fishing, boating and habitat function. H.108 clarifies the long-time practice that Vermont’s water quality standards apply to all surface waters, including rivers, lakes, ponds and, in particular, wetlands.

Promoting Forest Health & Biodiversity

Protecting the biodiversity of our forests is essential. We are facing a moment in time when forest fragmentation, habitat loss, the loss of connecting habitat, and the introduction of invasive pest and plant species are severely impacting our wildlife populations. Biodiverse forests store precipitation during severe weather events, and are a cost-effective means of sequestering (absorbing) and storing carbon. The committee is looking at how our neighbors, New Hampshire and Maine, support wildland conservation. We are also taking testimony about the value of wild forests and other natural areas. We are considering a change to Vermont’s “current use” program to allow privately owned land that’s managed as wild to enroll in this program with a conservation easement. This would encourage landowners to set aside areas as “forever wild.”

More News from the Virtual Statehouse

Pensions: Bridging the Unfunded Gap

State pensions are grabbing lots of headlines recently. Vermont oversees the pension management for three groups: state employees; teachers in pre-K to 12 schools; and municipal workers. The upkeep and viability of these funds is a vital oversight concern for the Legislature. In a January report, Treasurer Beth Pearce recommended changes that would significantly reduce the \$4.5 billion unfunded pension and other retirement liabilities – for example, by increasing employee contributions, or reducing cost-of-living adjustments for future retirees – but it's important to remember that her report is just a starting point. The Speaker has committed to bringing together all stakeholders to craft an equitable solution, and the Government Operations Committee has so far heard from the Joint Fiscal Office, Treasurer Pearce and key employee groups. The process of determining the best course of action will be time-consuming and laborious. You can [read Treasurer Pearce's report here](#) and [watch pension workshops here](#).

Ambitious Plan for Childcare System

High-quality childcare is an investment in Vermont's future. By increasing access and affordability for Vermont's families, we help parents stay employed and contribute to their local economies. By increasing childcare worker wages, we can support and grow our early educator workforce. By prioritizing the well-being and development of our children, we are giving the next generation of Vermonters a head start to success. [H.171](#) will make these investments a reality. The reforms offered in this bill are based on feedback from Vermont's parents, providers, employers, and community members. Not only does H.171 make childcare more affordable, it removes barriers to access, ensures fair wages for providers, establishes workforce development programs, and creates a study to identify future revenue sources. H.171 is a monumental step towards funding child care in a way that reflects its true value to our state, and we are proud to be key sponsors of this bill.

Broadband: Supporting Rural Buildout

Access to high-speed internet is essential to daily life. We use the internet to go to work, attend school, see a doctor, interact with government, and connect with our community and the world. Unfortunately, the promise of modern communications has bypassed many rural communities in Vermont. A comprehensive bill ([H.360](#)) seeks to accelerate community broadband deployment throughout Vermont. Key elements include: funding for pre-construction expenses, expanded grants and loans for building broadband infrastructure in unserved and underserved areas, a new workforce development program, and protections for Vermonters' privacy and unrestricted access to the Internet. This bill would bring over \$50 million of new capital to support the construction of community-based fiber assets in the most underserved parts of the state. The legislation also establishes the Vermont Community Broadband Authority to coordinate and fund broadband buildout, to support Vermont's regional communications union districts (like our own SoVT CUD) and their partners, and to advocate at the federal level for programs and policies that will accelerate the deployment of universal broadband in rural Vermont.

Climate Action: Transportation and Weatherization

The [Transportation Modernization Act of 2021](#) (H.94), introduced with 70 co-sponsors (including me and Seth), moves climate and equity goals into the Transportation Budget Bill. The bill seeks to: Save Vermonters money • Reduce climate pollution • Expand existing programs like the state electric vehicle (EV) incentive and Mileage Smart • Make it easier for low- and moderate-income Vermonters to purchase low- and zero-emissions vehicles that are cheaper to fuel and maintain • Continue fare-free transit to eliminate transportation costs for people who might not be able to afford it otherwise • Expand the Complete Streets program and improve high-traffic corridors for cyclists and pedestrians. These costs associated would ideally be funded through the increased federal monies that are coming to Vermont to support transportation. Also: Vermont has some of the most energy-inefficient housing stock in the nation. Weatherizing a home often pays for investment in less than five years and provides continued reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, energy costs, and health care costs, while increasing public health, for many years into the future. The legislature will be providing significant support for accelerated weatherization programs for Vermonters.

Revitalizing Downtowns: Better Places Program

After the completion of a pilot program, the legislature is working with the Governor to devote \$5 million to create the Better Places Program. This program would provide grants between \$5,000 and \$20,000 to improve the vitality of downtowns, with a focus on projects that can make an immediate impact to public spaces. Public area beautification, bike baths, use of vacant property and storefronts, enhancing farmers' markets or community gardens, and projects to support downtown performing arts are examples of ways these funds could be used to revitalize town centers. Municipalities, community groups, and nonprofits would be eligible to apply. A further budget request has been recommended to add \$5 million to the Downtown Transportation Fund. This fund supports many larger projects aimed at improving the infrastructure of downtown centers, including streetscape improvements, street lighting, parking and signage upgrades, and pedestrian and bicycle safety. See [H.159](#) and [learn about the program](#).

Increasing Recovery Beds Statewide

Work continues on [H.211](#) to improve the quality and increase the number of recovery beds across the state. Recovery residences are a key component of treatment alternatives for substance use disorders. The bill would exempt homes certified by the Vermont Alliance for Recovery Residences from certain landlord and tenant legal relationships. The certification process provides a toolkit with statewide definitions, detailed expectations, and operational policies, which will improve the quality of recovery homes. The bill also clarifies zoning standards for recovery homes as single-family residential use. It would allow recovery homes to be located in proximity to transportation, employment, and support services. Vermont changed zoning standards more than 30 years ago for independent living group homes for people with disabilities. It is time for similar clarity for recovery homes. The bill also establishes guidelines for temporary and permanent removal of recovery home residents to ensure due process and balance individual and community rights.

Tax Structure Commission: Recommendations for the Future

Every 10 years, the legislature charges an independent tax commission with looking across our system of taxation to make recommendations for the future. We received [a draft of this report](#), and it includes proposals for moving to a fully income-based system of education taxes, broadening the sales tax base, and seeking to tax wealth more accurately through capital gains, estate tax changes, and more. To learn more, [watch the workshops on Vermont's tax system](#) hosted by the Ways and Means Committee.

Funding Capital Projects at the State and Local Level

The Corrections and Institutions Committee continues to take testimony regarding the Governor's [proposed Capital Budget](#). The \$123 million proposal funds building and infrastructure projects across state departments through the allocation of bonded dollars each biennium. While the majority of funds go to specifically planned projects, a significant amount of money is designated for grants and loans to Vermont communities. This locally-focused component of the Capital Budget creates important opportunities for municipalities and community entities to leverage state dollars to initiate projects, stimulate growth, and address local needs. Some of the grant and loan opportunities considered include: [Building Community Grants](#) (cover a variety of areas, from recreation and cultural facilities to historic barn restoration and economic development initiatives) • [Agricultural Water Quality Grants](#) • [Drinking Water State Revolving Fund](#) • [Municipal Pollution Control Grants](#) • [Land Conservation and Water Quality Projects](#). Visit each program's website to learn more about the application process and deadlines.

And That's Not All!

Additional bills and resources include: The [Vermont Agriculture and Food System Strategic Plan](#), a road map for future policy decisions • The report of the [Rural Healthcare Task Force](#) (January 2020), highlighting the healthcare workforce crisis that our state faces (solutions include scholarships, loan forgiveness and tax incentives) • A bill to address disturbing disparities in our healthcare system for Vermonters who are BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, living in poverty, or people with disabilities (Kath is a co-sponsor of [this bill, H.210](#)).

During the 2021 remote legislative session, all committee hearings and floor meetings are live-streamed and available to watch anytime on YouTube, providing an unprecedented level of transparency and voter access. Links are available on the General Assembly homepage and each House and Senate committee page. Start your search at: legislature.vermont.gov.