

Concord Report February 2022

The first House meeting of 2022 took place at the NH Expo Conference Center in Manchester on Jan. 5-6. The unusually early start date, the packed schedule, and the long days were the direct result of Republican leadership's continued effort to curtail meeting dates and minimize debate throughout the 2021-2022 biennium. In most years a Special Session dealing with motions to override the Governor's vetoes would have been held in the late summer or early fall. But that did not happen in 2021.

More importantly, an enormous backlog of "Retained" bills had to be heard at the initial House meeting in order to meet House deadlines. The retained bills had been removed from consideration, and were prevented from being heard, or acted upon last year. Whereas the purpose of retaining a bill is to allow additional work to be accomplished, few received any additional attention in committee, just up and down votes - largely on party lines. When the bills were re-submitted to the full House in January dozens were summarily removed from further consideration, by yet another parliamentary maneuver - "Tabling." But as is so often the case, such maneuvers can be a two-edged sword and were successfully used to remove some of the worst bills aimed at public education and reproductive rights.

Covid - It continues to be both frustrating and disappointing that House members must risk their health, and that of their families by being required to be physically present in order to fulfill their responsibilities. The Senate, in contrast continues to meet in Representatives Hall at the State House, with ample room for social distancing and more than adequate ventilation. The Senate's proactive, protective measures also included amending their rules to allow for remote participation - for both committee meetings and Senate sessions - for the 2022 session. The necessary technological measures have been instituted such that "... a member may participate in a Senate session from a remote location by electronic or other means that ensures that the member participating remotely is able to simultaneously see and hear each of the other members of the Senate speak during the session... A quorum of the Senate shall be present in the chamber at all times."

Remote public testimony - Inexplicably in December it was announced that there would no longer be any option, in either the House or Senate, for remote testimony at public hearings, but as of mid-January that is no longer the case. Could it be that

the wave of Democratic and public protest against this step away from increased public participation played a role? The process of signing in – whether in support or opposition to a bill – and of submitting written testimony has been streamlined and is easier to use than it was last year. Directions and links can be found either on the General Court website, or the websites of the House and Senate – with directions as to how to use the links provided. If you have difficulty accessing these portals – please give us a call and we will make every effort to assist you.

House sessions and committee hearings are also being broadcast live online and via YouTube. Again check the website for easy links – or go to YouTube directly.

Redistricting. As we discussed in the December-January edition of Plain Facts, changing New Hampshire’s electoral district maps to account for population changes should have been straightforward and simple – as it has been over the past 100 years. As there has been little population change, very little change was required to account for it. The Democratic party proposed shifting a single town to even up the numbers in our state’s two Congressional Districts. Not to be denied the opportunity of creating at least one safe Republican seat, the Majority instead moved 75 towns and roughly a quarter of the state’s population in an outrageous example of gerrymandering.

Although the Majority’s map (HB 52) passed the House on January 5, on Jan.21 the Governor called on the NH Senate to redraw the lines. “In an interview for "CloseUP," Sununu said he asked state Senate leaders to alter the house map to make the districts more competitive. "We're a purple state," Sununu said. "From a political standpoint, I think Republicans can definitely win in CD2. Why would you concede that? I think if you have a map like that, you're really locking folks in. I just think it could be better" (<https://www.wmur.com/article/sununu-new-hampshire-senate-redistricting-political-map/38849914#>). It might also help the state weather a legal battle over the egregious gerrymandering in HB 52.

The biggest redistricting change for residents of Plainfield and Cornish came with HB 50, designating the new House Districts. **Plainfield and Cornish will comprise their own district with 1 Representative for the two towns.**

Grantham will have its own district, and Springfield will be joined with Sunapee. We will also be placed into an entirely new floterial (at-large) House district with Newport, Unity and Charlestown. Unfortunately the new floterial boundaries will prevent us from benefiting from the extremely able representation of Rep. Linda

Tanner in the future. Thank you, Linda, for all your hard work on behalf of your constituents over four terms in office!

Our Senate boundaries will change as well, but luckily Sen. Sue Prentiss will still live within its revised boundaries. As presently drawn our towns will comprise the southern end of that Senate district and we will be jointly represented alongside much larger towns like Lebanon and Hanover. The Senate's proposed map will probably come before the House after Crossover – late in March.

New bills - January saw an unprecedented number of bills before the full House and its individual committees. Not only did we have the Governor's vetoes (no spoiler – no overrides were approved) and the mountain of retained bills in the very first week of the month, but we immediately had to take up consideration of new bills in committee, with only a gap of two working days. As a result we can only touch on a few of those bills in any detail in this column.

Rep. Tanner's Education Committee has received over one hundred bills that include: limiting local control, adding regulations for school boards, extending 'divisive concepts' censorship to post-secondary schools (both colleges and our state university), establishing a teacher loyalty oath, establishing accountability for charter schools and vouchers, and regulations for COVID vaccinations, masking, and testing.

But the main issues for Education this year remain the perennial ones of inadequate public school funding and vouchers. Several bills address various parts of the complex school funding program from per pupil costs to building aid. A pending lawsuit is soon to be decided on the State's responsibility for an adequate education and what it entails. Valuable data on the effect of school funding on the learning outcomes of our students has been compiled by the school funding commission in their December report. It is available at:

(https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/12/final_report_forcommission_v5_12012020.pdf)

We currently have three voucher programs for educating children in the state. Vouchers provide money through a third-party vendor to parents to use as they see fit for the education of their children outside the public school system. They can be used for tuition at private, religious, internet schools or homeschooling. A proposed fourth voucher program will take local tax dollars raised for local students and use it to award vouchers to parents to spend as they see fit for the education of their child. Several bills this year will look at increasing

accountability both financially and academically for these funds, revising eligibility for the program, a possible cap, and their long term sustainability.

Public education, our community schools, school boards, staff and teachers are under attack as a result of the parents' and students' frustrations dealing with COVID restrictions and students trying to learn under distracting and disruptive conditions. Unfortunately, there are outside groups and social media groups who want to misinform parents and urge them to aggressively confront the people who work in, and with, our schools and our children. Teachers and staff are doing the best they can to keep our children safe and provide the best instruction possible. It hasn't been easy and this psychological warfare and inappropriate confrontation is breaking them down. Please take a moment and thank your school board, staff, school nurse, support staff, substitutes, and teachers for all they are doing. Sometimes all they hear are complaints about problems and anger. Remember community-based public schools and free public education are a cornerstone of our democracy and our communities.

Rep. Oxenham's Science, Technology and Energy (STE) committee has a substantially lighter load than the Education committee in the second half of the biennium. However, ill-informed and often ideologically-based debates are undermining its members' ability to prepare the state for the clean energy transition or grapple with pressing issues. Any bill that mentions climate change, much less one that seeks to mitigate the impending costs and harms to residents and businesses, is simply dead on arrival. Energy efficiency investments that save us all on our electricity bills are being cut back to the bone.

The best work is currently being done at the local level – across the state – via local Energy Committees and the new Community Power program (see article on the Community Power Coalition of New Hampshire - CPCNH in this issue)

Rep Sullivan's Labor, Industrial and Rehabilitative Services Committee has 31 House Bills and two Constitutional Amendments this session. A number of bills address COVID precautions and mandates in the workplace. They will be heard together on January 27. The committee chair has reserved Reps Hall for these hearings as they may draw a larger crowd than the committee room can accommodate.

A few other bills of interest include HB 1207 which would require employers to provide a limited amount of paid time off for employees to vote on election day.

Another, HB 1251 would eliminate the sub minimum wage for tipped workers. If passed it would have tipped workers earning at least the current minimum wage with tips added on top. We will also deal with HB 1385 which would prohibit the use of credit history in employment decisions with the exception of employees with hold substantial financial responsibility.

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