

**JOURNAL OF THE JOINT ASSEMBLY
OF THE
STATE OF VERMONT
ADJOURNED SESSION, 2010**

IN JOINT ASSEMBLY, JANUARY 7, 2010

2:00 P.M.

The Senate and House of Representatives met in the Hall of the House of Representatives pursuant to a Joint Resolution which was read by the Clerk and is as follows:

By Senator Shumlin,

J.R.S. 36. Joint resolution to provide for a Joint Assembly to receive the State-of-the-State message from the Governor.

Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives:

That the two Houses meet in Joint Assembly on Thursday, January 7, 2010, at two o'clock in the afternoon to receive the State-of-the-State message from the Governor.

Presiding Officer

Honorable Brian E. Dubie, President of the Senate, in the Chair.

Clerk

David A. Gibson, Secretary of the Senate, Clerk.

Committee Appointed

Senator Peter E. Shumlin of Windham District moved that a Committee of three Senators and three Representatives be appointed by the Chair to wait upon His Excellency, the Governor, and inform him that the Joint Assembly was now convened for the purpose of receiving his State-of-the-State message.

Which was agreed to.

The Chair appointed as members of such Committee:

Senator M. Jane Kitchel, of Caledonia District
Senator Philip B. Scott, of Washington District
Senator Jeanette K. White, of Windham District
Representative Patti Komline, of Dorset
Representative Floyd W. Nease, of Johnson
Representative Sandy Haas, of Rochester

The Committee performed the duty assigned to it and appeared within the Joint Assembly accompanied by His Excellency, Governor James H. Douglas, who delivered the following message:

Governor's State-of-the-State Message

“Mr. President, Mr. Speaker, members of the General Assembly, distinguished guests, my fellow Vermonters:

“Before I begin today, I want to acknowledge the loss of two dedicated public servants, Representative Ira Trombley and Representative Rick Hube. Our thoughts are with their families and we are grateful for their contributions to our state.

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“Each morning the people of our state awake with a simple hope: to build a better future for themselves, their families and the generations that will follow. Throughout our history, Vermonters have mustered the strength to meet each day with the wisdom, ingenuity, and tireless work ethic of our Yankee forebearers.

“From towns, villages and cities, they've elected representatives to bring that same focus to the People's House. It is here where we carry forth our proud tradition of self-government – always striving to forge a state, nation and world better than before.

“Today, that work is far from done. In these uncertain times, we must transform our public and economic framework by redesigning how we deliver state services and refocusing efforts to create jobs and ensure economic security for Vermonters. Out of necessity and because it is the right thing to do, we must act now to write the next chapter in the proud history of Vermont.

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“As we gather to embark on this work, let us keep in mind our friends and neighbors serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, and those preparing to leave. Our service men and women are asked to defend self-government and individual freedom in a part of the world where there is too little of both. Their efforts contribute to a noble legacy forged by Vermonters from the Battle of Bennington to Cedar Creek, from the beaches of Normandy to the streets of Baghdad. These brave men and women embody the best of the Vermont spirit and their sacrifice inspires us all.

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“I've seen, time and again, the will of Vermonters to change, reform and make better this great state. I've seen what can be accomplished when we

work together, putting the public good before self interest. Indeed, the last decade has been full of such accomplishments.

“When it comes to keeping our neighborhoods safe, there will always be more to do, but our shared commitment gives me confidence that we will be ever vigilant. I’m proud that we have worked together to send a clear message to sexual predators that they will be prosecuted and severely punished in Vermont. And while illicit drugs still destroy too many young lives, the DETER program has increased our efforts with better education, prevention, treatment and rehabilitation for those who suffer from addiction, as well as strengthened enforcement against drug dealers.

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“Vermont’s commitment to our natural resources is unwavering. The Clean and Clear Action Plan is a model for how government, citizen groups, farmers and others can work together to reduce pollution in our waterways. We’ve led on climate change by partnering with other northeastern states in the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative. And we were the first state to join California in adopting more stringent standards for automobile emissions, ultimately forcing the federal government to follow our lead. Our environmental leadership is a source of pride that sets us apart and gives us a leg-up in the green economy.

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“That Vermont is the healthiest state comes as no surprise. It’s in our nature to be active, enjoy our outdoors, and eat healthy. We’ve taken our message to young Vermonters with our Fit and Healthy Kids program, to working Vermonters with our Worksite Wellness programs and to older Vermonters with my Commission on Healthy Aging. And we’ve achieved groundbreaking health reforms with our innovative Blueprint for Health, the Global Commitment waiver and Catamount Health. In just two years, we have seen our uninsured rate drop by 25 percent. And with the Blueprint, we’re beginning to bend the curve on costs. By combining coordinated care, health information technology and payment system reform, we are eliminating duplicative, unnecessary services and creating a more efficient and effective health care system.

“These common sense approaches are not only being emulated in Washington; they are delivering real results here at home. Rhonda Rose of St. Johnsbury is a Blueprint for Health success story. Rhonda’s chronic illness was a significant challenge, draining her bank account, as well as drawing heavily on state resources. Her local community health team stepped in and made a full assessment, taking the necessary actions to get her health back on track and prevent expensive emergency room visits. Not only has Rhonda’s

health improved, but she's been able to go back to work and is enjoying life again. I'm very pleased that Rhonda can join us in the balcony today.

"As we look to make programs and services better and more affordable, we need only to look to these achievements, particularly in health care, as a beacon for the kind of positive change that's possible when we work together toward a common goal. In that spirit we must partner again.

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"Our successes are threatened by massive budget shortfalls, unfunded liabilities and a broken system of education funding. Working families have been battered by recession and employers weakened by state policies that are barriers to job creation.

"The trajectory of the Vermont economy for the next decade will be shaped by our decisions this year. If we are content to limp out of this recession, hobbled by flat job growth, we can choose to recycle old ideas and hope for a different outcome. But if we want to spring out of this recession – strong and nimble – we must have the heart to reform, the wisdom to act and the courage to stand against those who will say it cannot be done.

"Mere "recovery" is not enough for Vermonters who have persevered through this long season of decline. We must strive for a healthy and growing economy, prepared to compete with states next door and countries around the world. Prepared to compete – and win.

"These times demand new thinking – they demand bold action – and they demand it now.

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"A balanced and responsible budget is at the core of getting our state on track. Make no mistake: there will be many unenviable choices among worthy priorities. The solutions required to close the gap will invariably draw objection and complaint. Although we will consider constructive alternatives, this is not the time nor the place for the reflexive defense of the status quo.

"If we put off hard decisions for yet another year, we will be left with a cumulative deficit of a half billion dollars over the next three years – our worst choice, by far.

"Two days ago, we took an important step in the right direction when I was joined by legislative leaders to announce the results of our collaborative effort to find sustainable savings.

"Representatives Obuchowski and Sweaney, Senator Snelling and my Administration worked together on a plan that will save \$38 million in the

General Fund next year – resulting in millions more in savings down the road. This is the type of break from business-as-usual that is essential for our success. By setting this agreement in law by the end of this month, we can move forward with greater certainty on the tougher budget challenges ahead.

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“Access to our courts and the timely resolution of cases is one of the fundamental obligations of state government. Ensuring that Vermont’s judicial system is financially sustainable is of utmost importance. In the past year, the Judiciary has pitched in to help meet our fiscal challenges. While furloughs and occasional Court closings were necessary, they are not acceptable long-term solutions.

“The recommendations of the Commission on Judicial Operations provide a blueprint for a stronger and more affordable system of justice. I know some ideas are controversial; some changes depart from long-held traditions; and the necessary rebalancing will affect certain districts and constituencies. But like all of our decisions this year, narrow interests must take a backseat to the broader public interest. The General Assembly must give these recommendations due consideration, finding in them, as I have, a path forward.

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“These are just two steps in the process of building a balanced, responsible and sustainable budget. The spending plan I will present on January 19th will be informed by these and other efforts underway to address our \$150 million General Fund shortfall.

“With 40 percent of the total state budget spent in human services, many of the tough choices we must make will affect this system. Service providers will be asked to find efficiencies. Some beneficiaries will have to accept reductions in order to preserve benefits for the most vulnerable. Still some programs and grants will be significantly reduced or eliminated. But we will lessen these impacts by redesigning how we deliver services. To assure that Vermont’s safety net is sound even in the most challenging economic times, we must reform.

“Our redesigned system will be easy to navigate, with a single point of entry and flexible options, catering to individual needs. We will work with service providers to ease their administrative burden. Our focus will be on outcomes for Vermonters – providing a clear and direct path back to health, employment and independence. Success will be measured not by how much we give, but by how well we help Vermonters move from assistance to self-sufficiency.

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“While our budget deficits are daunting, we must always keep in mind that they are a symptom – not the cause – of the everyday challenges of the people of our state. Last year, Vermonters median household income fell by nearly \$1,900 from the year before. Our workforce shed more than 10,000 jobs since October 2008. And Vermont’s population is among the slowest growing in the nation, with more people leaving the Green Mountain State than moving in.

“These numbers tell a sobering story. If we want to keep the jobs we have, if we want to get our small businesses to succeed in a global economy, if we want to attract rather than turn away people and potential companies, then we need to focus on the fundamentals.

“Employers of all sizes, in all sectors, have made clear what they need to restart the engine of our prosperity: lower taxes; universal broadband and wireless; reliable, affordable energy; a well-trained workforce; and an education system that is top-notch without being top-dollar.

“A Vermonter who is employed doesn’t need an unemployment check; a Vermonter earning a good wage doesn’t need state assistance to help pay the bills; and a young Vermonter with a stable job can put down roots and strengthen a community. That’s why I call on lawmakers to join me in putting the economic success of Vermonters first.

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“The single most consequential action we can take to encourage a healthy economy is to address the crushing weight of Vermont’s tax burden. Time and again, employers tell me that our heavy taxation is stifling job creation, making it more difficult to retain our next generation. Increasing taxes, yet again, would only hasten our disturbing demographic and employment trends.

“To spur job growth, we need to take steps to roll back last year’s key tax increases, encourage growing companies with proven incentives and shore up the unemployment insurance trust fund with a responsible, balanced approach.

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“As you might remember, I opposed the income and estate tax increases passed by this Assembly last year. Those changes have swelled the ranks of Vermonters who are looking at other states – like New Hampshire or Florida – for their new, permanent residences.

“For those who are quick to say “good riddance,” think again. When we lose a long-time Vermonter to another state, we lose the community involvement, we lose the charitable giving, and we lose those deep roots that give Vermont its unique character – not to mention the tax revenue.

“While my first choice would be to unwind all of the increases at once, that is not feasible in the face of our current condition. Instead, we must address the critical components most detrimental to job creation as soon as possible and commit to buy back all of the increases – plus make additional tax cuts when the economy improves.

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“Governor Dick Snelling’s plan to respond to the recession of the early 1990’s was invoked many times last year to justify tax increases. But one key element of that plan – one that made it palatable at the time – was omitted. I ask the Legislature to, this year, honor the second critical part of the Snelling plan and enact a sunset for its tax hikes, while continuing to lock down the income tax rates. This action will send a clear signal to Vermonters and businesses that we are listening to their concerns and working to meet their needs.

“Further, the estate tax was increased last year to collect a greater portion of assets from deceased Vermonters. This change is particularly unfair to farmers whose assets are not easily mobile. It is a punitive tax that discourages farmers and small business owners from passing along their life’s work to sons and daughters. And, in the long run, it will have a tangible, detrimental effect on our revenues, as individuals change their residency to another state. I ask legislators to join me in rolling back this tax increase.

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“Until we lower our overall tax rates to competitive levels, we need programs like the Vermont Employment Growth Incentive as part of our economic development tool kit. Since 2007, this employment program has authorized incentives for nearly 2,000 new jobs, and saved more than 2,000 existing jobs that might have been lost if employers chose to relocate out of state. The program has helped employers of all shapes and sizes, from small firms such as Vermont Timber Frames of Bennington, to medium-sized employers like SB Electronics in Barre, to large companies like Green Mountain Coffee Roasters. As long as our tax burden remains high, I propose eliminating the VEGI cap to keep pace with the growing demand from potential employers.

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“These tax proposals are a critical step in our efforts to restore employer confidence and send a message that Vermont is ready to compete for jobs. Unfortunately, the cumulative effect of these changes will still not equal the inevitable increase in unemployment taxes. That is why we must act this year to make our unemployment insurance trust fund solvent. A modest reduction

in benefits coupled with phased-in increases in the taxable wage base is the prudent course to getting this fund back on solid footing.

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“There are additional investments in economic development that we can make now. I renew my call to use nearly \$9 million from the federal stimulus act for job creation. This money will help train workers, provide access to capital for small businesses and farms, promote tourism and enhance our telecommunications infrastructure. Employers have told us what they need – now is the time for us to listen and act.

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“When a company comes to our state with 50, 30 or even 15 new jobs, we trip over ourselves to welcome them. When a valued employer is looking to expand or move elsewhere, we work feverishly to keep them here. We have such a company: one that employs hundreds of Vermonters at good wages; makes hundreds of thousands of dollars in charitable donations; and pays millions in taxes every year. Yet, some are eager to shut it down.

“The decision about Vermont Yankee is central to our economic future and to maintaining a green energy portfolio. And it’s a decision that should be left to the federal and state regulators – away from the political fray.

“For the hundreds of Vermonters employed at Vermont Yankee and many more who benefit from its economic impacts; for the thousands of Vermonters whose jobs depend on our competitive electric rates; and for a stable, clean energy future, this Legislature should vote to let the Public Service Board decide the case for re-licensing.

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“Communications and energy factor into nearly every major decision an employer makes. In the post-recession economy, the two will be inextricably linked and for Vermont to compete globally, we must have the best of both working seamlessly together. Whether it is information technology, manufacturing, farming, education, or health care, a strong communications and energy infrastructure is critical to the Vermont economy.

“Fortunately, we start this new decade from a solid foundation built through years of hard work, planning and foresight. In 2007, the Legislature joined me in setting forth a very ambitious goal: universal broadband and wireless in every part of the state this year. The e-State initiative was – and remains – one of the most forward-looking, statewide telecommunications plans in the nation. Although the recession has slowed our efforts, we have made tremendous progress.

“Thanks to our head start, Vermont has been well positioned to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act – ARRA. While other states asked for planning funds, Vermont sought and won major federal grants for technology implementation. With nearly \$70 million in ARRA funds, plus an additional \$120 million in investment by Vermont utilities, we are building a high-capacity, fiber-optic backbone that enables next generation innovations to take root and grow in our state.

“Part of this backbone is our Smart Grid – a breakthrough in energy conservation. The Smart Grid will help families save on electric bills by knowing the best time to use appliances. Businesses will cut costs by choosing to operate equipment when it is least expensive. And Vermonters will be prepared to take advantage of new technologies – such as electric cars – to cut emissions and clean our air.

“From this high-speed backbone, we are working with telecommunications providers to build out our “middle mile” connection points into schools and libraries across the state.

“The final stop for Vermont’s high-speed network is in every home and workplace. This is where it gets complicated for a state that is comprised of steep rugged hills and winding dirt roads. There are some places you can’t get to from here – and, frankly, I don’t want to change that.

“But for families and businesses that want to get connected and are still not served by high-speed internet, I propose a “Backroads Broadband” program to spur local providers to build last mile connections. For two years, the Vermont Telecommunications Authority will delay the cost of a high-speed internet connection into the home or office. For the providers, this means a guaranteed return for a limited window and a great incentive to run the final stretch of line to every customer. This is not an ongoing program for either customers or providers – it is a use it or lose it deal that will speed us toward meeting our e-State goal of universal coverage.

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“For employers and employees alike, the attraction of a state wired from stem to stern is powerful. Businesses of all sizes can be connected at every hour to clients around the world. Small footprint firms can be close to our lakes and mountains without sacrificing sales. Telecommuting options multiply for everyone.

“Within state government, the investments in a wired future will be pivotal in our efforts to deliver high quality services more affordably.

“With each new connection, the network’s potential grows for applications both public and private – helping Vermonters succeed from the office to the classroom.

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“The ever-growing burden of property taxes threatens the financial security of Vermonters and the potential of our employers. Getting a handle on this cost is essential to our economic future.

“In the last decade, total net education property taxes have nearly doubled from just over \$450 million to \$900 million today. And that \$900 million accounts for only two-thirds of what Vermonters actually pay to support education. Almost half of income taxes, a third of sales taxes and a third of the purchase and use tax go to pay the total bill.

“Containing costs is the only way to halt the climb of property tax bills and make our state affordable for families and businesses. That is why I continue to fight so hard to put the brakes on spending and to reform our broken funding system. In recent years, I called for caps on education spending, but we took only a small step in containing costs with the two-vote approach. Last year, I renewed my call to cap school spending as part of another push for comprehensive reform.

“Another year has passed: ideas have been offered; groups have met; studies of studies have been studied again; but little has been done. Despite the recession and near zero inflation, school budgets are still projected to rise by two percent next year. Property taxes are slated to increase by \$59 million. And for the first time since the enactment of Act 60, the statewide property tax rate will increase – by two cents – to cover ever-increasing costs, with an additional 20 cent jump over the following two years – pushing residential rates 26 percent higher than today. These facts paint a disturbing picture of a future burdened by increasing property taxes – suppressing job creation and homeownership.

“Meaningful reform must address each of the three core drivers that push property taxes higher year after year. Foremost, we need to cut costs and bring spending in line with reasonable standards. We must modernize our antiquated education bureaucracy. And we must be prepared to disentangle the twisted funding system born with Act 60. We can and must change, reform and improve education funding and, indeed, education in Vermont.

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“Since 1997, school staffing levels have increased by 23 percent, while our student population has decreased by 11.5 percent. The number of teacher’s aides has gone up 43 percent. The number of support staff has gone up 48

percent. For every four fewer students a new teacher, teacher's aide or staff person was hired. There are 11 students for every teacher – the lowest ratio in the country – and a staggering five students for every adult in our schools. With personnel costs accounting for 80 percent of total school spending, it's no wonder that our K-12 system is among the most expensive in the nation at \$14,000 per student per year.

“In most organizations, if your customer base is shrinking, you make adjustments to stay within budget and, at a minimum, you stop hiring. Although some will be quick to scold that “education is not a business,” neither is Medicaid or public safety or environmental conservation. But in each of these areas, if we ignore the basics of prudent financial management, we imperil the services that we provide. Until labor costs in our schools are brought under control, taxpayers can expect their bills to grow every year and the onus of the property tax will continue to threaten a healthy economy.

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“I appreciate the difficulty of reducing personnel costs. Over the past two years, the State has taken necessary – and sometimes painful – steps to find labor savings through vacancies, retirements, and, when all else failed, layoffs. I am grateful to state employees who last week ratified, by a wide margin, a new contract that is in the public's interest. A three percent wage reduction frozen for two years is a meaningful and important contribution to the greater challenges that face Vermont.

“To date, we have not seen similar agreements between teachers and school boards. In fact, teachers' salaries have continued to rise during this recession. If teachers' contracts mirrored the recent state employee contract, there would be no need to raise property tax rates in 2011.

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“Current staffing and compensation levels cannot be maintained as the student count continues to decline. If we simply move from our current 11 to 1 student/teacher ratio to 13 to 1, we would still have one of the lowest ratios in the country, while saving as much as \$100 million. If we want to make education costs sustainable, we must return balance to classrooms.

“I propose that over four years we bring our statewide student/teacher ratio to affordable levels. By leveraging the retirement bubble among teachers, we would be able to achieve significant savings through attrition alone – without any disruption in the classroom. This is not an early retirement incentive, but a mechanism to fill only one vacancy for every two retirements. Based on our experience in state government, this approach is sensible, achievable and much preferable to the alternative.

“To further rein in the massive growth in labor costs, I propose requiring that new teachers’ contracts establish a minimum 20 percent share for health insurance costs. State employees and many others in both the private and public sectors have accepted a 20 percent share as the standard contribution.

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“Our school governance structures are a vestige of the 19th century and, like our unsustainable personnel costs, must be reformed. We have 290 separate school districts – one for every 312 students – 63 different supervisory bodies and a State Board of Education. That’s a total of 354 different education governing bodies for a state with only 251 towns. We spend, by some estimates, nearly triple the national average for school administration. There is no doubt that we have room to make our system of education more efficient and affordable.

“A recently issued report from the Transformation Policy Commission outlined changes aimed at improving student outcomes. One recommendation – consolidating into as few as 12 education districts – highlights that a 21st century governance system can provide more than cost savings. A modern system opens the schoolhouse doors and allows students to explore new learning opportunities, in different settings, with the latest technologies.

“Reforming the outdated school governance bureaucracy is long overdue. The plan put forth by legislators and my administration two days ago calls for a five percent reduction in governance spending in the next fiscal year and an additional 10 percent reduction in 2012. Streamlining services, centralizing back office functions and consolidating districts will be necessary to meet the challenge. Restraining governance spending will allow us to make investments in reforms, classroom technology and, most importantly, our students.

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“At the root of our education funding challenge is a system that’s substantially eroding local control. Each year the connection between your school budget vote and your property tax bill becomes more and more distant. Expanded subsidies mask true costs. The budget you approve is not the budget you are billed for. And even as tax rates decrease, property tax bills increase.

“This is the upside-down world spawned from Act 60. When there is confusion, there is no control. If we are not serious about reforming this system, your Town Meeting vote will become an empty action and local control will be dead. We must not allow this to happen.

“At thirteen years old, our education funding regime has grown into an unmanageable maze of exemptions, deductions, prebates, rebates, cost-shifts

and hidden funding sources. Overlapping rings of complexity keep all but a few experts from understanding the many moving pieces. This is not good tax policy, not good government, and, if you ask most Vermonters, not good for much of anything. It's time to pull back the curtains and let the sun shine in on how education is funded. Transparency – Who is paying? What are we paying for? What are the results? – has been a missing element of education financing since the passage of Act 60.

“Something most Vermonters may be surprised to learn is that taxpayers are funding 1,000 students who don't exist. These so-called “phantom” students are a creation of our system. When a school reports its per-pupil count each year, that number can only decrease by 3.5 percent from the previous year – regardless of how steep the actual decline. For schools shrinking year after year, this policy compounds the distance between reality and what Vermonters pay for. I propose increasing the cap to ten percent this year, then gradually phasing it out over three years.

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“When I first went to Town Meeting, each voter knew that a vote for increased spending was a vote to increase his or her property taxes. Vermonters were generous, but careful.

“As education funding evolved, income sensitivity was created as a necessary safety valve to ensure that low income people weren't forced from their homes by high property taxes. Over time – and over my objections – the program was expanded to more and more people with higher and higher incomes. What started as assistance to the less fortunate has grown into an entitlement for over two-thirds of taxpayers, some with incomes as high as \$110,000.

“From a school budgeting perspective, income sensitivity subsidies distort decision-making by divorcing the majority of voters from the real cost of education. Next year 70 percent of Vermonters will be shielded from the full brunt of education spending decisions. When an increasing number of voters are exempted from paying the full share, higher school budgets become easier to pass. The natural check and balance of the old-time Town Meeting is gone.

“While that might seem like good politics to some, it is terrible policy. Each expansion of the subsidy pushes increased costs to a shrinking number of residents and businesses and further erodes local control. It sends spending and property tax bills ever higher – making our economy less competitive.

“The push for greater expansions has also led to extreme inequities in the system. There are over 6,000 Vermonters receiving a property tax subsidy

who own homes valued at \$400,000 or more. Of those, there are 136 people who live in \$1 million homes being subsidized.

“In the education fund, income sensitivity payments are a growing, dark cloud blocking out more important priorities. This program is expected to grow by \$26 million next year – a jump of 18 percent. It will be a full 11 percent of the entire education fund – bigger than the special, technical and adult education programs combined.

“If left unchanged, by 2012, the program will cost \$183 million – 54 percent more than just four years earlier. As the cost of income sensitivity grows, it leaves less money for important education priorities. The choice between directing education resources to our children and growing this subsidy is an easy one.

“By making progressive eligibility adjustments and curbing payments on homesteads valued greater than \$400,000, we can put the program on a sustainable course – preserving it for those who need it most.

“I recognize that changes to the income sensitivity program will impact some taxpayers, but bringing common sense to this subsidy is an essential step to reducing the overall cost of education and providing real property tax relief for all in the years to come. In fact, if income sensitivity payments were not increased this year, there would no increase in the residential property tax rate. Our goal must be to reduce the need for exemptions over time with responsible school spending decisions and a robust tax base that allows for lower rates.

“My proposals for education reform go to the heart of runaway spending and, taken together, stop the projected two cent increase, plus drop the rates by another penny. Compared against a system left unreformed, my proposal will result in \$33 million in lower property taxes – a welcome break for taxpayers.

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“As we work to reform education financing and bring balance back to our system, we cannot lose sight of our underlying purpose: to provide high quality learning opportunities at a cost that doesn’t strangle our economy, forcing our children to leave in search of jobs, taking our education investment with them.

“Throughout Vermont, efforts are underway to help students who learn in different ways, at different times. We must always be on the lookout for new ways to ensure our system of education is serving the needs of today’s students.

“Currently, Vermont schools are prohibited by law from accessing out-of-state distance learning programs. This is a barrier to a student who is, for example, interested in learning Chinese, while earning credits toward

graduation. If a school sought to provide a new Chinese program for this student, or even a group of students, they would have to hire a new teacher with the expertise – a costly step.

“Allowing students to access approved distance learning programs from around the country is a simple, affordable change we can make to improve quality and increase opportunities. And it is a change that complements our efforts to wire schools and apply new technologies to the classroom.

“No longer can we settle for the old paradigm that says the only way to improve education is to spend money to hire a teacher for a classroom. Instead, new thinking, creative ideas and an impulse toward change that excites, empowers and improves the education of our children must guide us in constantly reforming education in Vermont.

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“In all our efforts, Vermonters will judge us on the sum of our work, not the parts. They will judge us on our ability to get our economy moving again and on our ability to work together and craft a sustainable budget. If ever there were a time in our state’s history for public servants to join together, and to dedicate ourselves completely to the economic strength and individual prosperity of our people, that time is now.

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“As a young man, 37 years ago, I took my seat in this Assembly for the first time. I listened as Governor Davis bid farewell to the office I am now so honored to hold. That morning, the departing Governor spoke of a foundation rooted in fiscal responsibility, efficient government and environmental protection. But that foundation was not an end in itself; rather it served to help Vermonters face a fundamental question he posed: “How shall we preserve the Vermont way of life?”

“Like all under this Golden Dome, I’ve shared in the joys, sorrows, accomplishments and disappointments of daily life here and across our state. I’ve been a first-hand witness to, and participant in that “Vermont way of life.”

“I’ve seen it in a neighbor helping stack wood or pull a car from a deep rut in mud season. I’ve heard it in Town Meeting debates and deployment speeches. I’ve felt it on the coldest winter night and on a windy autumn day. And I’ve known it in the service of a firefighter, a church deacon or the anonymous volunteer just doing her part to better the community with no expectation of thanks.

“The “Vermont way of life” is something not easily defined. It’s rooted in a common decency and eternal hope for a better future. It’s a shared love of this

land and respect for one another. And I can attest that it is something worth preserving; something worth defending; something worth fighting for.

“As we embark on the road ahead, let us take strength and comfort from the knowledge that others, who’ve come before, have succeeded in keeping for this generation the promise of Vermont. But let us be humbled in the understanding that it is our duty to keep that promise for those who follow.

“God bless each of you and the great State of Vermont.”

Dissolution

The Governor, having completed the delivery of his message, was escorted from the Hall by the Committee appointed by the Chair.

The purpose for which the Joint Assembly was convened having been accomplished, the Chair then declared the Joint Assembly dissolved.

DAVID A. GIBSON
Secretary of the Senate
Clerk of the Joint Assembly