

February 13, 2017

Good evening members of the Senate and House Appropriations Committees. My name is Scott Woodward and I'm speaking to you as a resident of Pomfret and a member of Vermont's Early Childhood Business Council. Thank you for the opportunity to share my views with you.

Last election cycle, I ran as an Independent for the State Senate. During the election, I realized the importance of addressing Vermont's shortage of high-quality, affordable child care. My friend Susan Buckholz, who now represents the Windsor 4-1 District, invited me to join her a Let's Grow Kids meeting at the Family Place in Norwich. It was on that day that I became fully invested in the mission of Let's Grow Kids. I do not have kids, not yet, but I fully recognize the challenges we face. It is because of my commitment to helping solve this enormous challenge that I decided to continue advocating on behalf of Let's Grow Kids and to join the Early Childhood Business Council.

Availability of high-quality child care is important for a number of reasons, but the key bullet point that I encourage you to remember is that a child's brain is 90% developed by age five. In terms of access, finding high-quality child care becomes more and more of a challenge the further one goes from Chittenden County. For example, 98% of parents in Franklin County do not have access to high-quality child care for their infants and 65% of parents with infants do not have access to any regulated programs. Where I live in Windsor County the statistics are 79% and 64%, respectively. Here in Rutland County, 89% of parents with infants do not have access to high-quality child care and 63% do not have access to any regulated programs.

Last month, I wrote a commentary published on Vermont Digger ¹ making the case that child care is very much a part of Vermont's affordability challenges and that solving our challenges is directly related to expanding and strengthening our workforce. In the twenty years between 1990 and 2010, Vermont's population of

¹ <https://vtdigger.org/2017/01/20/scott-woodward-investing-affordable-child-care/>

people 45 and older grew by nearly 115,000 people. At the same time, those aged 20 to 44 decreased by nearly 40,000 people. Overall, our population is getting older and our workforce is shrinking. We need policies that will encourage growth of our workforce without increasing the burden on those who now carry the heaviest load. While being a stay at home mom or dad is a personal choice, it should not be the only choice.

As part of his budget proposal, Governor Scott planned for \$9.6 million in early childhood investment. I encourage the legislature to embrace the Governor's proposal, not only in terms of the specific investment, but also his broader "Cradle to Career" vision and thinking more holistically about education. If you don't agree with the Governor on the how to get there, I hope you will agree with him on the vision.

I also encourage the legislature to think critically about the budget and to look hard for efficiencies. The Blue Ribbon Commission on Child Care offered a number of suggestions in its final report² on how to pay for new investments without raising taxes (see pg. 34). If we're not already there, we will soon be at a place where we need to prioritize our investments and make tough choices about which programs in Vermont are most valuable. In light of a shrinking workforce and stagnant incomes, the legislature should strive to find efficiencies in government services without increasing the tax burden on an increasingly smaller working population.

To that end, if the legislature can't find other ways to pay for the investment in early childhood development, one idea I have is to redirect an existing subsidy. Today, there are more 2.4 million acres enrolled in the Current Use program, higher than ever before. By capping Current Use enrollment at 500 acres, which would affect about 300,000 acres of the total acreage in Current Use, the legislature could eliminate the property tax for registered child care providers and thereby provide a valuable incentive for expanding child care in Vermont. This would send a strong signal that growing kids is just as important as growing trees.

² <http://cdn.buildingbrightfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/VT-BRC-Final-Report-1.pdf>

Notes from 2/1 Kick-off Meeting of the Early Childhood Business Council

Scott Woodward: Exempting providers from property taxes

James Moore: Utilize existing and empty school infrastructure to relieve child care centers of fixed costs. Engage aging population for child care needs.

Michael Seaver: K-12 teachers become part of 0-22 system. Move early childhood into public education system. Schools are already untaxed—leverage the space.

Kyle Dodson: Better leverage students in higher education (“Jump Start” in Boston as an example) to get involved in early ed. Think about child care as the cost of doing business—not an add-on or benefit, but a part of our responsibility. Business partner with providers to support on-site child care.

Chelsea Condos: In-house child care in public school district to serve teachers and students’ kids as well as internships for vocational students.

Rick Davis: Social impact bonds. Address special education costs.

John Sayles: Permeable solutions across fields. We need to ensure that legislators know that the business community wants to break down silos. Address the Agency of Human Services and Education together.

Tim Smith: Include Agency of Commerce and Community Development pool of funding for child care centers. We need a better process to take the money decisions for development of child care programs out of local select boards.

Jill Berry Bowen: Highlight education and health care connection. Focus on “wellness.” How do we get ahead of the curve, for example “Rise VT”, to work on community ground swell from the early years. Intersect with existing programs.

Tom Torti: Reallocate existing funding in system. It will cost us money to pay early educators a livable wage. Need to accept tax increases; can’t do it with existing money.

Timo Shaw: Reallocate existing assets and resources, but think about doing it differently. “Uberize”. Make new connection between needs and services. Break silos. Look for a different solution.