

This is my third term as State Representative and my first representing Concord (and Kirby) as well as St. Johnsbury. I serve this term on the House Transportation Committee.

Our transportation system is changing. The first generation of electric vehicles has arrived, and frankly the results are mixed. EVs still have higher upfront costs than gas cars, though current incentives practically eliminate the gap for some models. And since they are mechanically much simpler than gas/diesel cars, maintenance costs are lower. Warm-weather range is decent enough for most people, but winter range is still a worry. And then there is the problem of how to maintain roads without revenue from a gas tax.

Yet it's clear the transition to EVs is proceeding. My committee has requested an analysis from VTrans of options for EV drivers — including out-of-staters— to pay their share for the roads. We are working with VTrans to build out a fast-charging network to serve travelers, and to ensure both homeowners and renters have access to chargers at home. Though for many people these are future problems, the lead time required means we must begin dealing with them now.

But not everyone has a car of any kind. Public transit in rural areas is difficult. Fixed routes at limited times meet the needs of too few people, and on-demand service is a challenge with long distances between riders and destinations. Both suffer from outmoded funding mechanisms. RCT and other transit providers are working hard on creative solutions, and my committee is very supportive.

A major issue facing the Legislature this session is the impact of declining Federal dollars post-pandemic on State finances. One way that is hitting us hard locally is education funding and property taxes.

Our schools are facing many issues: misbehavior and loss of learning hangover from the pandemic; higher costs to attract and retain quality teachers and staff; deferred maintenance and construction; and changing funding formulas. It's a lot. Taken together, the pressures undoubtedly will lead to higher property taxes. How much higher is in the hands of school districts across the State. As I write this in January, everyone is looking to local boards to recognize the statewide problem and reflect it in their budgets.

Another issue affecting us locally is public safety services. Police and fire departments struggle to fill vacancies, while gang violence usually thought of as an urban issue seems more and more common here. The funding system for emergency medical services is woefully inadequate, leaving CALEX no choice but to ask towns to pay more. The repeated flooding suffered by other parts of the State last year — but thankfully not too badly here, yet — highlights the need for better emergency planning and preparation, and for upgrading local roads and culverts, before it does hit us.

We continue to work on the perennial issues of housing and workforce. Bills are in committees to reform Act 250 to facilitate appropriate housing development, for example. Fortunately last session we did make progress funding childcare and raising provider pay, and ensuring kids don't go hungry at school — both over vetos by the Governor, by the way. But much more to do, hopefully with the collaboration of the Administration and the Legislature.

Something else I have been working hard on is the Caledonia Food Co-op. Most, I'm sure, are aware of the CFC's effort to purchase the former Walgreens building on Railroad Street in St. Johnsbury. This will be a full-service grocery owned by community members, focused on supporting local producers, and dedicated to bringing fresh, local food to everyone. As you read this, CFC is on the threshold of finalizing purchase of the building, and we need to ask again for the tremendous community support that raised the down-payment last August. Please see www.caledoniafood.coop for information on how you can help!

Thank you for the honor of serving you in Montpelier. Please join me at one of my monthly breakfast meetings on the following Saturdays at 8:00 AM: March 16, Kitchen Counter Cafe, Railroad St, St. Johnsbury; April 20, Mooselook Diner, Rte 2, Concord; May 18, Kitchen Counter Cafe. Or drop me a note at scampbell@leg.state.vt.us.