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Linda Joy Sullivan: In search of initiatives that will spur real growth

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By Linda Joy Sullivan

We're at the "halfway mark" of this year's legislative session, which to me is resembling more of an endurance test than a fast-paced horse race. I'm not seeing much currently in the works that reflects a broader vision of the need to achieve a more prosperous Vermont through sensible growth. There are admittedly at least three separate proposals that have a lot of facial appeal because they promise to benefit our families economically. However, even if all three pass, I'm concerned that the benefits that will flow from them to workers and their families will fall short of advancing long-term prosperity and increasing economic opportunity.

The proposal to change the way we finance education in order to lower our property taxes is at first glance attractive. Lower property taxes! Finally! However, I understand that the version of the bill that came out of the House Ways and Means Committee last week was pushed through pretty quickly and without supporting testimony. Tax legislation always requires very careful study. Many are concerned that the current proposal just shifts taxes from one form (property) to another (income), and unless we are in fact reducing overall education spending (\$1.6 billion) it's hard to deny that argument. On the spending side, of course, we can't just take a meat cleaver to education budgets. I'd much rather see us

work on education tax reform more deliberately and hand-in-hand with an effort to make our spending much more efficient.

The sentiment to increase our minimum wage is also very attractive. Yet I worry still about increasing costs to our businesses without at the same time growing our economy. On the other hand, the promised wage increase will only be rolled out over many years and even when fully implemented will probably result in wages not much greater than the wage base we are already assured of achieving given the built-in cost-of-living increases that are guaranteed under existing law. This proposal seems to me to promise more risk than guaranteed additional benefit to workers.

The paid family leave proposal got a lot of study last year and as a result its current design seems appropriately tailored to both allow Vermont families to secure leave when important life events occur without crippling our employers financially. It is a compassionate and well-intended piece of legislation. Still, this proposal does little to help provide greater opportunity and prosperity to Vermonters.

The troubling recent news about the financial plight of Castleton University and the withdrawal of its contribution to the efforts of the Rutland Economic Development Corporation underscores the need for us to really focus on securing long-term economic growth. As a result, I get much more excited about legislation and other initiatives that reflect efforts to expand our economy sensibly (consistent with Vermont values) that are squarely aimed at growing our tax base, increasing our housing stock, investing in infrastructure, improving our downtowns, attracting businesses and workers to the state, retaining our youth and enhancing educational and training opportunities.

There are things happening ... and not just in the Legislature. I'm a big fan of H. 854, a bill principally sponsored by Rep. Brian Keefe (and recently taken up by the House Commerce Committee) to encourage the development of strategies to promote television and film production in the state as a means of achieving workforce development opportunities for younger Vermonters. This and other proposals to increase our post-secondary training and educational opportunities deserve our aggressive support.

I'm intrigued as well to learn more about how the Administration's recent designation of 25 so-called "opportunity zones" will spur private investment in Vermont's businesses and communities. On an entirely separate front, thirteen communities in Central Vermont (Barre, Berlin, and others) appear from their Town Meeting votes to be advancing a proposal to create a communications union district to develop a regional fiber optic network akin to the network currently being built out by ECFiber in East Central Vermont (Randolph, White River Junction and others).

Investment in broadband and wireless connectivity is absolutely critical to the economic development of the cities, towns and rural areas outside of Chittenden County.

Improvement of our telecommunications infrastructure deserves the full-throated support of both the Legislature and our current Administration.

At my urging, Secretary Schirling of the Agency of Economic and Community Development has agreed

to visit the Dorset Inn on Monday, March 26, at 10 a.m. to address the State's commitment to these investments. I am hoping many of you will come out and take full advantage of the opportunity to be heard regarding the state of our internet and wireless service in the Northshire.

As always, I hold my constituent meetings the first two weekends of each month. Email me at lsullivan@leg.state.vt.us

Rep. Linda Joy Sullivan, D-Dorset, represents Danby, Dorset, Landgrove, Peru and Mount Tabor in the Vermont House of Representatives.



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