

## Introduction

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### **Mission**

The Vermont Chamber of Commerce supports and promotes an economic climate conducive to business growth and preservation of the Vermont quality of life.

### **About the Vermont Chamber of Commerce**

In business since 1912, the Vermont Chamber of Commerce is a private, not-for-profit statewide business organization with nearly 1,500 members representing all regions of the state and sectors of the economy. The Vermont Chamber lobbying team works throughout the year advocating for business growth and facilitating collaboration between government and the business community. The Vermont Chamber of Commerce promotes policies that support economic development and benefit the employers we represent. The Vermont Chamber of Commerce is independent of national, regional and local chambers of commerce.

### **Purpose of the *Business Agenda***

The Vermont Chamber of Commerce is committed to evaluating, tracking and actively advocating for public policies that ensure business success. Working with government officials at both the state and federal levels is critical to achieving employers' economic development initiatives. This document is intended to provide elected officials and state leadership with an overview of the Vermont Chamber of Commerce's policy positions, as developed by our Government Affairs Committee, and approved by our Board of Directors.

### **Executive Summary**

The policies within this document reflect the positions of the Vermont Chamber of Commerce for the 2017 – 2018 Biennium and consistently support a favorable business climate through:

- Increased economic development and job creation by strategic investment in workforce development and training, marketing initiatives, and infrastructure;
- Lowering the cost of doing business through permit reform, streamlined regulations, lower taxes and the removal of overly burdensome government mandates on business;
- Recognition of the cumulative impact of new taxes, fees and mandates imposed on the business community over the past six years;
- Government accountability through voting records, efficiency in government operations and public involvement;

- Investments in the State's international trade programs, working to resolve issues associated with border crossings and promoting a unified international trade policy that will enhance the capabilities of the Vermont business community;
- Creating environmental policies that strike a balance between responsible environmental protections, private property rights and economic opportunity;
- Assessing current energy programs before creating new policies or mandates; and
- A health care reform program that achieves cost containment and does not shift the cost burden onto businesses and employers.

# Economic Growth

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Continuous economic growth is essential to ensure a robust economy that can provide opportunities for all Vermonters. Addressing various factors including but not limited to: improved broadband and mobile coverage, deepening the talent pool for employers by marketing Vermont as a place to live, work and do business, uniformly applying Act 250 regulations at the district commission level and increasing growth incentives and decreasing mandates will result in vigorous business expansions, relocations, and start-ups.

A business climate that fosters growth can be achieved through sound fiscal policies that address and mitigate many of the high costs of doing business through taxes and fees, energy, workers' compensation and health care costs.

## Competitiveness and Job Creation

Increasing Vermont's competitiveness in the national and international marketplaces will result in job growth and higher quality jobs for Vermonters, therefore increasing revenues to the State.

### ***The Vermont Chamber of Commerce supports:***

- Efforts to reduce the cost of doing business in Vermont by:
  - Continuing to reform the workers' compensation system;
  - Reducing and streamlining regulations;
  - Lowering taxes and fees; and
  - Preventing and eliminating unfavorable mandates on businesses.
- Sufficient resources for effective and efficient economic development programs coupled with benchmarks to assess results;
- Access to capital and different alternative financing options as appropriate for businesses;
- Providing like entities equal status for tax and regulatory purposes;
- Programs to aggressively and cooperatively promote the commercial, manufacturing and tourism sectors of the economy;
- When cost efficient, sourcing goods and services locally;
- Market determination of wages and benefits; and
- Growing the inventory of workforce housing to help attract and retain a skilled employee pool, increase business profitability and enhance the state's competitiveness.

## Telecommunications

Robust access to high-speed internet and mobile coverage has been a priority in all regions for several years and progress has been made through continued investment and policy implementation. Ongoing work should focus on executing existing policy for the residents and businesses currently not being served, with a goal of upgrading infrastructure so that Vermonters have adequate broadband connections.

### ***The Vermont Chamber of Commerce supports:***

- Efforts to encourage increased and incremental private investment in communication facilities that extend broadband and wireless services in Vermont, making permanent 2014 legislation, while ensuring that public funds are not used to overbuild existing networks;
- The statewide expansion of broadband and wireless services with a priority focus on areas that are currently not served;
- Allowing private sector businesses to operate free of unreasonable government regulations, workplace mandates and new or increased taxes and fees on telecommunications or broadband; and
- Limiting the creation of new licenses and fees for existing telecommunication infrastructure on State property in order to support and encourage more privately funded broadband projects.

## **Electronic Commerce**

The Vermont economy, at the local, regional and state levels, is a major benefactor of the vast opportunities provided by e-commerce. As a matter of public policy, Vermont should promote all forms of electronic commerce.

### ***The Vermont Chamber of Commerce supports:***

- Strong policies for the protection of intellectual property and security of internet transactions;
- Enacting federal laws regarding censorship, privacy and access to promote consistency throughout the nation and avoid regulations unique to individual states;
- Instituting a level playing field for sales tax collection for traditional and online retailers at the Federal level for uniformity with other states;
- Aggressive efforts to implement all transactions with State government to electronic format and payment systems; and
- State policies that are technology neutral and solutions that can be self-sustaining as technology advances.

## **Government Accountability**

Ensuring that government is accessible and transparent to the people it serves is a hallmark of good government. The Vermont Chamber of Commerce believes that government officials, both elected and appointed, should serve the public interest in a transparent and accountable manner.

### ***The Vermont Chamber of Commerce supports:***

- Four year terms for constitutional officers;
- Holding legislators accountable for their voting records by implementing an electronic voting system in the State House;
- Creation of an ethics commission, as Vermont is currently one of three states without this type of proven oversight;
- An ongoing evaluation of existing regulations and programs, and their administration, to determine their ultimate economic impact, utility and efficiency in regard to both the consumer and the business community;
- Limiting rules and regulations to legislative intent;

- Preparing risk assessments, fiscal notes, and cost-benefit analyses for all proposed laws, mandates or regulations, to demonstrate that the benefits outweigh the costs; and
- Holding regulators accountable for the cost, scope, burden and effectiveness of regulations issued by state and federal agencies.

## **International Trade**

Maintaining and promoting international trade increases production and sales, resulting in increased State revenue. In addition, international trade is the mechanism that promotes worldwide economic development, and grows our knowledge and understanding of other cultures.

### ***The Vermont Chamber of Commerce supports:***

- A unified international trade policy that will enhance the capabilities of the Vermont business community to engage in international commerce, including advocating for additional free trade agreements including the Free Trade Area of the Americas;
- Continued investment in the international trade programs and infrastructure that assist Vermont companies;
- Promotion of Vermont's close proximity to Canada for tourism and business growth, including continued promotion of the Quebec-Vermont Trade Corridor to expand partnerships in both regions;
- Increased intellectual property protections around the world;
- Timely and predictable border crossing and customs clearances for commercial tourism traffic; and
- Continued investment in Vermont's transportation infrastructure, including air, rail and highways, to promote the flow of goods and services internationally.

## **Workers' Compensation**

The Vermont Chamber of Commerce supports improving worker safety without mandated programs that increase costs to employers and hinder job creation. Injured workers should return to work safely, quickly and cost effectively. The longer a person stays out of work, the less likely that worker will return. The Vermont Chamber of Commerce supports the workers' compensation program as a means of compensating employees injured in work-related accidents or by occupational diseases, while protecting employers from legal liability.

### ***The Vermont Chamber of Commerce supports:***

- Continuing the reform of the workers' compensation program by assessing the appropriateness of Vermont's benefit levels and compensable injuries as compared to other states;
- A study that compares Vermont benefits with those from other jurisdictions to determine if caps on benefits would bring this system more in line with other states;
- Maintaining the current standard of burden of proof for mental stress. The standard should not be lowered to make such claims easier to pursue against employers;
- Continued development and deployment of special workplace safety training and awareness programs to demonstrate the benefits of workplace safety and lower the incidents of workplace injuries and illnesses;
- The development of medical and safety standards as guidelines for all parties to adopt, as applicable;

- Continuous improvement of business processes at the Department of Labor to assure efficient and accurate processing of claims and appeals;
- A single definition of “employee,” that does not discourage businesses from hiring independent contractors;
- Continued and expanded education of all medical practitioners, adjusters and all parties to the workers compensation claim process, to assure understanding of current law, terminology, technology and practices in the workers compensation arena;
- Development and funding for investigation and prosecution of all types of worker compensation fraud by employers and employees;
- The consideration of a Bureau of Enforcement and Compliance for all types of insurance fraud;
- A study and report on statistics involving the number of accepted/disapproved denials (Form 2) and discontinuances (Form 27) and the number of interim orders mandated by the Department of Labor over a two year period;
- Provisions for an automatic stay of a decision by the Commissioner pending appeal to the Superior or Supreme Court. In the alternative, legislative changes enabling recovery of, or credit for, monies paid pursuant to a final order of the Commissioner if such a finding is reversed upon appeal;
- Modifying the statute on permanent total disability benefits to be consistent with the death benefits and discontinuing benefits when the claimant or claimant’s spouse is entitled to social security act benefits or whichever occurs first;
- Utilization of the most current edition of the AMA Guides to the Evaluation of Permanent Impairment to determine permanent partial impairment;
- Post-accident drug testing of employees involved in a workplace accident;
- A biannual review and updating of workers compensation fee schedules; and
- Reducing workers’ compensation costs through apportionment of aggravating injuries and pre-existing conditions.

# Education and Training

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Having strong State-supported education and training programs that address occupational needs and emerging opportunities will result in greater productivity, innovation and economic growth.

## Education

The Vermont Chamber of Commerce supports education policies that provide every Vermonter an opportunity to become and remain a self-sufficient and productive member of society.

### ***The Vermont Chamber of Commerce supports:***

- Reducing the cost of providing primary and secondary public education, thereby lowering the tax burden by implementing:
  - A standardized statewide cost and revenue accounting system for all districts and supervisory unions;
  - Complete transparency for all district and supervisory union cost and revenue accounts and projections;
  - An examination of lowering the number of school and administrative personnel relative to the number of students to conform to declining enrollments; and
  - Examining the financial disincentives to students participating in work-based learning and technical centers.
- Improving the quality of education through:
  - Measures to improve teacher quality, including performance-based compensation and greater flexibility in teacher certification requirements;
  - Statewide school choice, for pre-kindergarten through grade 12, including both public and approved independent schools, with tuition funds directed to the receiving school;
  - Standardized assessments of student performance;
  - Initiatives to assure safe learning environments within public schools;
  - Early childhood (pre-kindergarten) education, with particular stress on supporting children from disadvantaged families;
  - Dual enrollment and flexible pathway programs to improve matriculation to higher education and to improve student readiness for and participation in post-secondary training; and
  - Efforts to re-define student equity in terms of programs rather than dollar amounts.
- The consolidation of supervisory unions and consolidation of school districts;
- Maintained and increased funding to support access to high quality post-secondary education at the University of Vermont and the Vermont State Colleges; and
- Alignment of high school and college programs with workforce needs.

## Workforce Education and Training

Attracting and building a workforce trained with the skills that address the critical talent acquisition needs of Vermont's businesses and reversing the human capital flight is crucial to the state's future economic security. The Vermont Futures Project has identified a workforce

supply gap of nearly 11,000 workers each year to meet the projected demand of employers. Businesses report this is a primary barrier to sustainability and growth and the Vermont Chamber prioritizes programs and policies that will deepen the talent pool.

***The Vermont Chamber of Commerce supports:***

- Technical and workforce training with curriculum tied to national industry skills standards at regional technical centers for high school students and adults;
- Sustained and increased funding for federal and state workforce education programs, including the Vermont Training Program and the Workforce Education and Training Fund to train or re-train Vermonters for jobs of the future;
- Incentives for smaller employers to fund further education and training of employees;
- Better alignment of all elements of education and workforce development programs with national standards and business-specific skills to better prepare students for the workforce;
- Greater emphasis on science, math and engineering (STEM) in our Pre-K-16 education system;
- Student exposure at all ages to regional work settings, workers, and growing sectors through field trips and worksite visits, as well as work-based learning opportunities in every high school; and
- Increased education of students, parents, and educators about Vermont career pathways.

# Energy

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The Vermont Chamber of Commerce endorses a balanced energy policy, increased development of North American resources, supply diversity and the most efficient use of energy to ensure Vermont's economic security. The Vermont Chamber of Commerce recognizes that sufficient, affordable and reliable energy is necessary to encourage positive economic activity and provide jobs.

***The Vermont Chamber of Commerce supports:***

- Programs for renewable energy that allows for their sustained and cost effective deployment while avoiding significant cost shifts to rate payers and helps maintain a regionally cost competitive portfolio;
- The ability for state regulated utilities to be innovative and provide programs that offer clean energy products and service that help achieve state energy goals while also saving money and reducing costs for their customers;
- A thorough cost/benefit analysis of existing energy mandates before implementing new policies and regulations;
- Maximum levels of cost-effective energy conservation and use of energy-efficient equipment, appliances, buildings and vehicles, consistent with national and state codes and standards;
- Prudent energy efficiency, demand management and combined heat and power initiatives;
- The build out of electric vehicle charging infrastructure in the private sector to promote economic development;
- Market-based environmental regulation that incorporates environmental and energy planning;
- Recognition that incorporating environmental externalities in energy pricing, or taxing energy sources in order to discourage energy use, may have an adverse impact on economic activity in the state;
- A strategy to increase the use of alternative sources of energy, while acknowledging petroleum based fuels remain an important source of energy for heating, transportation, manufacturing and industrial facilities and economic development;
- The fair application of Vermont's permitting process to ensure that the best available and most cost effective technology and standards for energy efficiency will be applied to any structure or development;
- Maximizing the use of Smart Grid technology for automation of efficiency, reliability and renewable generation;
- Opportunities to lower energy costs by supporting more options for energy services and providers;
- The availability of natural gas service as a cost effective and environmentally sound choice in regions not presently served by this energy source; and
- Balanced policies and regulations that are fair to businesses of all sizes and benefit the overall Vermont economy.

# Environment and Regulation

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Vermont businesses must compete in the rapidly changing global market, making predictable, reasonable and cost-effective government policies and regulations critical for planning and attracting global enterprise. Protecting the environment should be balanced with a fair, timely and predictable environmental permitting process, which acknowledges the necessity for economic growth and development to enhance our quality of life.

## Environmental Regulation

The Vermont Chamber of Commerce believes a strong economy generates the revenue needed to support necessary environmental programs to protect and conserve natural resources, maintaining Vermont's unique environment and character.

### *The Vermont Chamber of Commerce supports:*

- The use of sound scientific research of environmental problems and for the identification of proposed solutions;
- The implementation of cost-effective regulatory programs such as environmentally sensitive site reclamation for contaminated properties;
- Sound land-use planning that is locally derived and controlled, with input from directly affected parties, including industries, businesses and landowners. This planning should further the public interest by creating a balance between responsible environmental protection, private property rights and economic opportunity;
- The use value appraisal of productive farm and forest lands to conserve natural resources;
- Streamlined and voluntary environmental audits to assist facility managers and regulatory agencies in achieving environmental improvement and compliance;
- The recognition that existing and potential commercial activities involving the use of Vermont waters, such as snow-making, hydro-electricity and other private, state or municipal uses, are not in direct conflict with the public interest and therefore represent legitimate uses of the state's waters;
- Investing in state water remediation, targeting limited funds to "critical source areas" such as agricultural and other non-point source stormwater runoff in order to achieve maximum efficiencies resulting in the greatest improvement to water quality;
- Amending Act 200 to remove the veto power in the approval process of Regional Planning Commissions over town plans, and to give greater consideration to the protection of private property rights;
- Efforts to oppose private right-of-action which allows individuals to sue businesses they believe are violating environmental standards;
- Notifying property owners when any portion of their property is considered for designation in a map, plan or inventory resulting in limiting the owner's use of that property and requiring the owner to provide a public benefit;
- Landowner compensation when new environmental regulations take private property for public use which may significantly reduce the value of that property;

- Efforts to oppose government seizure by eminent domain of private land for recreational purposes; and

## **Permit Process**

The Vermont Chamber of Commerce believes efforts can be made within current regulatory statutes to streamline the permitting processes, providing greater consistency and predictability for applicants. Permit processes should support development and ensure environmental quality. Better coordination between federal, state and local regulatory entities can eliminate duplication and delay.

### ***The Vermont Chamber of Commerce supports a balanced permitting policy which:***

- Streamlines the permitting processes so that all regulators can coordinate efforts resulting in greater government efficiency and shorter timelines for permitting;
- Is fair, timely and predictable, and recognizes the necessity for economic growth and development;
- Encourages citizen participation at the District Environmental Commission (DEC) level for Act 250, but limits appeals of DEC decisions to the Environmental Court to parties as specified under current law;
- Provides for Act 250 appeals to be heard “on-the-record,” thereby requiring that any appeal to the Environmental Court will consist of a review of the record created by the District Commission and not “de novo” review (an entirely new hearing and new evidence);
- Recognizes that permits issued by the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources, following adequate public review with participation rights for directly affected parties, should meet the legal requirements of the applicable environmental criteria in Act 250 proceedings, thereby eliminating duplicate review;
- Provides for a fair primary agricultural soils mitigation policy, which balances the need to protect primary agricultural soils with the need for economic development and housing;
- Has a rational and predictable state stormwater permit process that recognizes the regional and international impact of non-point sources of runoff (including phosphorus) from the state of New York and the province of Quebec;
- Utilizes cost effective municipal waste water systems to resolve storm water issues for discharges into impaired waterways; and
- Encourages clear and concise municipal plans and zoning regulations.

# Fiscal Policy

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A consistent and predictable fiscal policy should be integral to the overall State plan and vision for business development and job growth. State fiscal policy should reflect the need for investment in areas that create jobs and reduce Vermont's high tax burden while maintaining a policy that is equitable, predictable, sustainable and understandable to all taxpayers.

The direct correlation between tax policy and the cost of doing business is a major factor in decisions to start or grow a business, resulting in more jobs and increased revenues to the State.

***The Vermont Chamber of Commerce supports:***

- A tax policy that avoids tax increases because of the demonstrated adverse effect on economic development and business growth;
- Funding new or expanded social programs through existing General Fund appropriations rather than increased taxes;
- Efforts to make Vermont's tax policy more competitive with surrounding states;
- A balanced budget combined with a stable, predictable and competitive tax climate;
- Implementing market-based incentives to encourage growth instead of state mandates on businesses;
- Tax policy that encourages business investment such as phasing out the corporate income tax and tax incentives or favorable treatment of capital gains;
- Tax policy that encourages people to move, shop and stay in Vermont;
- Tax policy that encourages expansion into Vermont by Canadian businesses;
- Using the Unemployment Insurance Trust Fund only for unemployment benefits;
- Limiting and discouraging the imposition of local option taxes;
- The use of Transportation Fund revenues strictly for projects directly related to the source of revenues and the end of the diversion of transportation funds to unrelated general purposes;
- Keeping government spending increases consistent with the rate of inflation and economic growth by prioritizing and combining government programs with a goal of eliminating duplication;
- Reasonable audits by the Tax Department with notice to impacted parties, including proper notice and ability to comment on changes in tax bulletins;
- The requirement that the State pay property taxes on government-owned buildings to the municipalities in which they are located; and
- Privatization of programs whenever possible and appropriate.

# Health Care

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The Vermont Chamber of Commerce believes health care and health care insurance should be affordable, and thus more accessible, without sacrificing the quality of service and freedom of choice that Vermonters have come to expect. Vermont should move toward meaningful and long-term reform that focuses on cost containment to maintain a financially sustainable system.

***The Vermont Chamber of Commerce supports:***

- Health care proposals that do not unfairly target businesses to fund or subsidize reforms, especially when the stated goal is to separate health care from employment;
- Health care proposals that do not unfairly target people based on family size or income;
- Elimination of cost shifting caused by inadequate government reimbursement to health care providers for Medicare and Medicaid by focusing on prioritized spending rather than new revenue;
- Developing a financially sustainable Medicaid program for current eligible populations before adding new benefits or increasing the eligibility levels of Medicaid;
- Increasing access and treatment options, controlling costs and improving quality through open and competitive market-based measures;
- The work of the Green Mountain Care board to focus on cost containment initiatives;
- A multi-payer health care system that enhances the health care market, allowing continued employer participation;
- Tort reform to minimize defensive medical practices and to discourage frivolous lawsuits;
- Utilization of medical services through cost-sharing techniques such as co-payments, premium contributions, deductibles and health savings accounts;
- Providing the self-employed with the same health insurance tax equity as other businesses;
- Reducing the cost impacts of mandates and regulations;
- Making Vermont Health Connect a voluntary option for businesses and individuals;
- Exploring a transition to the federal exchange, instead of using Vermont Health Connect;
- Encouraging personal responsibility in health care decisions; and
- Ensuring that employers covered by ERISA will not pay into any health system that they are not utilizing.

# Transportation

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The Vermont Chamber of Commerce recognizes the essential role of safe, dependable transportation systems. Highway and bridge maintenance delays result in significantly higher costs, decreased safety and less reliability, affecting all highway users including tourists, suppliers and employees. The use of transportation funds for purposes other than the construction, maintenance and repair of Vermont's transportation infrastructure jeopardizes economic growth in the state. A well-functioning transportation infrastructure is critical to economic growth, national and international competitiveness, safety and quality of life.

***The Vermont Chamber of Commerce supports:***

- Improvements in the regulatory process and management practices so that funds can be efficiently deployed without incurring significant time delays and inflated costs to construction projects;
- The use of Transportation Fund revenues strictly for projects directly related to the source of revenues and the immediate end of diverting transportation funds to unrelated general purposes;
- The recognition that Vermont is dependent on a variety of transportation systems that are user-funded and economically viable including highway, rail and air networks;
- An accelerated highway and bridge construction schedule which utilizes all available transportation funds to complete postponed or delayed transportation projects;
- Improvements and repairs to existing roadways and bridges taking precedence over planning new transportation projects, unless safety and traffic volume or economic development factors dictate otherwise;
- Effective winter highway maintenance and adequate delivery of police and fire services to ensure the safe movement of goods, services and people within the state, especially during high-risk winter weather conditions; and
- Growth in the aviation industry statewide to enable Vermont companies to better access global markets.

# Travel and Tourism

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The economic impact of travel and tourism is crucial to a healthy economy in Vermont because this industry provides substantial employment opportunities and generates considerable tax revenue for the State's General Fund. The Vermont Chamber of Commerce supports investments in tourism marketing programs and promotional efforts with a goal to increase occupancy rates resulting in greater revenues to the state. Tourism marketing is one of the few ways in which the State spends money that in turn generates a significant investment of out-of-state dollars that mostly stay in Vermont.

***The Vermont Chamber of Commerce supports:***

- An increased level of promotional funding for the Vermont Department of Tourism and Marketing (VDTM);
- Leveraging volume discounts and relationships by, as a first priority, investing funding into major markets for advertising, promotion and public relations to consistently market Vermont to travelers on behalf of the industry as a whole;
- Secondly, investing funding in promotion of Vermont's niche assets such as weddings, biking, culinary, B&Bs and inns when that investment comprises of promotional campaigns that are purchased and managed by VDTM;
- Ensuring that all new promotional investments include an analysis of current market penetration and opportunity;
- A small discretionary fund to be directed to organizations or events that promote awareness of Vermont's niche markets or toward projects that will benefit economic development in Vermont as a whole;
- Participation in regional marketing initiatives that promote New England as a destination area for overseas travelers, as well as distant markets in the United States and Canada;
- Incorporating new and emerging technologies, including online, mobile and social networks into traditional travel and tourism sales and marketing strategies;
- Continuing domestic and international tourism marketing efforts aimed at motor coach group tours and international travel;
- Statutes and regulations that encourage the safe and reasonable growth of Vermont's beer, wine, spirits and specialty food industries;
- Encouraging common-sense practices to reduce, reuse and recycle to enhance Vermont's reputation and attraction as an environmental leader; and
- On the federal level, expanding the visa waiver program to enhance seasonal employment, and making our borders safe yet encouraging the free flow of travel and commerce.

## Executive Committee

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