

Policy Leaders are Listening to Vermont Businesses

By Betsy Bishop, President, Vermont Chamber of Commerce

Prevailing post-adjournalment reports have sidelined the praise both the Legislature and the Administration deserve for their contributions to Vermont's economy. While it is tempting to continue debating the 2019 political turmoil, the Vermont Chamber of Commerce instead chooses to celebrate some of the many areas where legislators actively responded to the needs of the business community.

With a Democratic supermajority controlling the House and Senate, and a Republican occupying the State's highest office, pre-session legislative forecasts predicted disfunction and conflict. Fortunately, Vermont continues to distinguish itself as a place of civility and reason. This was made evident by the cordial and productive relationship witnessed in the 2019 legislative session between the Legislature and the Governor. Ultimately, what was lost in catchy headlines was gained in the passage of some overwhelmingly beneficial economic policies.

But this cohesion was no accident. Throughout the winter and spring, the business community pressed the State House to first, do no harm, and second, to begin addressing some the State's most urgent economic needs. The Vermont Futures Project identified a goal to increase the workforce by 10,000 workers annually, and the Legislature showed its commitment to mitigating this supply gap by supporting policies that better attract and retain a highly trained workforce. While the issue of worker shortages impacts virtually every industry and was a topic at the forefront of most economic development conversations, it was only one of many areas where significant progress occurred.

Governor Scott and the Legislature truly embraced the opportunity to work together whenever possible, placing the interests of Vermonters far ahead of temptations to partake in unproductive political gamesmanship. Evidence of this is most apparent in the bipartisan focus on economic development that characterized the 2019 legislative session. Some of the resulting standout successes include:

- Passage of a workforce bill that provides \$1.95 million for expanded incentives, including the remote workers program and \$2 million in tourism marketing funds as well as an additional \$225,000 to market Vermont as a place to live and work
- Provision of resources to research initiatives to better enable populations with traditional barriers to employment to enter the workforce, with emphasis placed on the corrections population, workers in recovery and new Americans

- Changes enacted to the Vermont Training Program to add guidelines that focus grants on small businesses
- Passage of legislation to include marketing of the State-owned airports in the State's economic development marketing plan
- Passage of legislation that clearly defines State-owned master permits for airports, including Act 250, Agency of Natural Resources and other applicable permits
- Passage of a broadband bill that that substantially increases broadband access to the nearly 50,000 Vermonters who lack high-speed internet

The Vermont Chamber of Commerce commends the work of all policy leaders, but particularly acknowledges the legislative leadership of Speaker of the House Mitzi Johnson and Senate President Pro-Tempore Tim Ashe, as well as the Scott Administration's ongoing commitment to make Vermont an affordable and economically robust state. The minority party was also an essential element in promoting affordability and a policy environment that prioritized strong economic development initiatives.

Like all states, Vermont faces many challenges – high taxes, cumbersome permitting requirements for development and an overall high cost of doing business, to name a few. But considering the real economic progress made in 2019, this session was undoubtedly a win for the business community.