Fall Advocacy Update

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The VLCT advocacy team is ready and raring to go for the 2025-2026 legislative biennium. In this update, you'll find more information about VLCT's new policy priorities for the upcoming session, recent calls for action by members for the state to respond to homelessness, and resources for Act 47 and Act 181 implementation to realize new home construction in your community.

One of the most consequential presidential elections in American history has concluded, and Vermonters have cast their votes for state offices. President Trump will return to the White House in January and the U.S. House and Senate will be in Republican control. Here too, in Vermont, the balance of power has shifted with the Democratic supermajorities broken and the Republican party gaining an executive seat with the election of John Rogers for Lieutenant Governor.

While the Republican gains in Vermont are not a landslide, they are a change in momentum. After four years of post-pandemic expansions to state regulatory control for climate action and massive infusions of both federal and state cash for childcare, food security, flood recovery, workforce development, and housing – voters across the state have shifted priorities and supported incoming lawmakers who share a commitment to reining in property taxes and ramping up housing and economic development.

In the House chamber, Democrats only successfully flipped three seats blue – one vacated late last session by Progressive Mayor Emma Mulvaney Stanak – while the GOP gained 15 in total across open races and against Democratic incumbents. The Secretary of State's office will manage potential recounts and prepare the official election results for certification in January; however, our initial analysis shows that there will be 39 freshman representatives sworn in for the 2025-2026 biennium. There will be at least two new chairs following the defeats of incumbents Diane Lanpher and Mike McCarthy, who served as chair in the Appropriations and Government Operations committees respectively.

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While shake-ups in the House have become somewhat of the new norm, there has been a rare and true changing of the guard in the Senate. Chittenden County Senator Philip Baruth is likely to return for a sophomore tenure as President Pro Tempore with seven new senators and at least five new committee chairs following the retirements of Senators Jane Kitchel, Brian Campion, Bobby Starr, and Dick McCormack; the passing of long-serving Senators Dick Mazza and Dick Sears; and with new gains for Republicans in Addison, Orleans, Orange and Chittenden counties. With a refreshed and more moderate chamber and new chairs at the helm for Appropriations, Judiciary, Natural Resources, Transportation, and Agriculture, VLCT sees fresh opportunities abound to get serious about lowering property taxes, building housing, and protecting public safety.

2025-2026 Municipal Policy and 2025 Legislative Priorities

The 2025-2026 Municipal Policy (opens in a new tab)was developed by five legislative policy committees who worked throughout the summer and was approved by all voting delegates present at VLCT's 2024 Annual Meeting in early October. To focus VLCT's advocacy efforts, the staff and board are working now to identify a short list of priorities to drive action in this upcoming session. While we sort through what our specific asks may be, our strategy will be to capitalize on the statewide momentum toward new housing development and helping lawmakers reckon with voters' demands to lower property taxes and improve the functions of state government.

Look for our legislative preview in December which will outline our priorities, provide updates on the changing legislative landscape, and announce opportunities for you to get involved.

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In the meantime, you can find last year's legislative updates, action alerts, and more in the Advocacy(opens in a new tab) section of our website.

General Assistance Program, aka the Motel/Hotel Program

On September 19, the State of Vermont began an initial mass un-sheltering of people from the General Assistance (GA) Program, also known as the "hotel/motel program". The un-sheltering will continue on a rolling basis until December 1. Between September and October over 1,000 people lost access to shelter, including approximately 300 children and many households with elderly Vermonters and people with disabilities.

This unprecedented action couldn't come at a worse time. Our rental vacancy rate is at rock bottom, local shelters are full, service organizations are at a break point, and municipal emergency responders are run ragged in their efforts to support unsheltered people and maintain public health and safety for all. Local governments and non-profit providers are overwhelmed from managing three years of impacts from the poorly managed motel/hotel program amid skyrocketing rates of homelessness statewide. Vermont has reported 3,458 people living unhoused in 2023 (a 300% increase since the pandemic) and has the second-worst homelessness rate in the country. The number of available rooms in the GA program has been reduced to 1,100 (a cap set in last year's budget bill(opens in a new tab)) leaving more than 2,000 people in line for scant shelter space.

The day before the first round of evictions, fourteen municipal leaders from across the state gathered in Montpelier to call for swift, decisive action from all three branches of state government to respond to the crisis. The VLCT members called on state leaders

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to bring the full resources of state government to bear to alleviate the pressures on cities and towns. The leaders gathered called for immediate state actions, including:

- The deployment of operating capital to non-profit organizations and municipalities
- The opening of State land, buildings, and facilities for camping, shelters, and transitional housing
- The creation and operation of temporary and permanent shelters
- Changes in judicial and prosecutorial approaches for those individuals who are compromising public safety and need services
- Better management of the GA Program to keep unhoused individuals within their existing support networks

Since then, exits have continued and public pressure for the state to respond has been mounting. School districts(opens in a new tab), service providers(opens in a new tab), local leaders, advocates, and even lawmakers(opens in a new tab) have all called for urgent action. The Governor announced plans to open three new shelters in Waterbury, Williston, and Montpelier. So far, two shelters(opens in a new tab) have been opened with room for seventeen families.

For many local leaders this initiative is a day late and a dollar short. State Government has all of the resources, authority, and capacity to deliver human services and must take the lead in creating adequate shelter, supports, and transitional housing.

To add your voice to VLCT's advocacy around housing and homelessness in the weeks and months to come, email Samantha Sheehan at ssheehan@vlct.org(opens in a new tab).

Realizing Opportunities for New Housing

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In the 2023 legislative session, lawmakers passed and Governor Phil Scott signed Act 47(opens in a new tab), also known as the (HOME Act) the first of two recent landmark housing bills. Act 47 primarily mandated local zoning changes without commensurate changes to Act 250 or other state permitting processes. It also removed some impediments to housing construction and renovation and dedicated $200M in the FY24 budget to housing construction, renovation, and assistance. Most provisions of the bill took effect in July 2024.

Lawmakers followed up Act 47 with Act 181, which gives many communities a path to Act 250 exemption for growth centers (a top priority in VLCT's 2023-2024 Municipal Policy), creates an Act 250 exemption for housing in smaller but densely settled areas, and sets a rulemaking process in place to map and protect environmentally sensitive areas.

To realize these new Act 250 reforms, the bill sets up complex systems for implementation, some of which are mandated to municipalities through changes to local zoning, planning, and bylaw, others to be led by the Regional Planning Commissions, and many by the newly established Land Use Review Board (LURB). The LURB will be adopting some of the current authorities of the district commissions, as well as responsibility for rulemaking and map drawing for the new location-based Act 250 exemptions. The LURB is expected to be seated and begin meeting in January.

To help municipalities navigate and leverage Act 47 & Act 181 implementation, VLCT recently hosted a Planning and Zoning forum. You can find those presentations online here(opens in a new tab) and here(opens in a new tab), which include summaries of the municipal pre-emptions and a timeline of upcoming processes and deadline.

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Legislative County and Regional Governance Study Committee

Act 118 created a new study committee to explore regional governance structures in Vermont, including county government. The group began meeting in August and is due to issue a report to the Government Operations committees on or before November 1, 2025. VLCT is one of nearly a dozen organizations assigned to a technical advisory group working with the committee, which includes representation for States Attorney's and Sheriffs, Planners, Clerks and Treasurers, City Managers, School Boards, and more.

In October, VLCT Executive Director Ted Brady joined a panel on Vermont Edition to discuss the study committee's work, our concerns, and priorities. You can listen online here(opens in a new tab).

VLCT members have long recognized the importance of intergovernmental collaboration and Vermont's cities and towns often coordinate through work agreements to deliver critical services such as emergency services dispatch, ambulance transport, law enforcement, and broadband deployment. The problem with these types of agreements is they are ad-hoc, can be short lived, and may carry prohibitive risks and be an administrative burden for small towns.

Some have argued that creating new county government could bolster Vermont's competitiveness for federal grant programs – but that is a lukewarm problem with a host of other potential solutions. VLCT supports efforts to regionalize that are service based, optional, and focused on meeting the statewide issues that transcend town lines. Most importantly, any efforts by state government to regionalize services must preserve local control and save taxpayer money.

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We want to hear from you about ideas that allow municipalities to work together to scale up essential services while controlling costs and improving efficiency. To stay engaged on this topic, you can follow County and Regional Governance Study Committee meetings and testimony (agendas are posted here)(opens in a new tab) and reach out to VLCT's Director of Intergovernmental Affairs Josh Hanford at jhanford@vlct.org(opens in a new tab).

Get Involved

Last year, VLCT hired Josh Hanford in a new role as Director of Intergovernmental Relations. The reorganization of VLCT's advocacy team recognizes that we must focus on the complex relationship between federal, state, and local governments in order to solve the modern problems that Vermont's municipalities face. In October, Josh was joined by our new Municipal Policy and Advocacy Specialist Samantha Sheehan. Samantha most recently served in the office of former Mayor Miro Weinberger (a former VLCT President) and is an experienced advocate and policy communications professional from Hancock, Vermont.

You can meet both Josh and Samantha at our first **Advocacy Chat** of the session, which will be held via Zoom on December 16 at 1pm. Register to attend(opens in a new tab).

To support VLCT's advocacy work; participate in policy development, testimony, and legislative actions; or just to learn more, reach out to Josh and Samantha by email at jhandford@vlct.org(opens in a new tab) **and ssheehan@vlct.org**(opens in a new tab)**.**

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