

2014 Legislative Report

Bills and Policies Influenced by VBSR Advocacy

The 2014 legislative session opened with some VBSR priority areas carrying over from the 2013 session, in particular legislation on the labeling of genetically modified food and expansion of Pre-K education. Other issues, such as net metering, a minimum wage increase, and toxic chemical reform, were new to this session and VBSR worked closely to influence these policies.

We received tremendous support from our members this year, working to advance VBSR's legislative agenda and making positive change for Vermonters. We want to extend our gratitude to the many members who either spent time writing to legislators, testifying in committee hearings or simply taking time away from their daily jobs to support advocacy that truly makes an impact in promoting socially responsible businesses in Vermont. Below you will find a few of VBSR's successful policy efforts from the last session; if you have questions or comments about any of this information, we invite you to contact our Public Policy Manager, Daniel Barlow, at danielb@vbsr.org

Clean Energy and Energy Efficiency

Net Metering (H.702)

VBSR came out in strong support of H.702, a bill that works to expand what is arguably the most beneficial renewable energy program in Vermont. The bill raises the net metering cap from 4 to 15 percent of peak load coming from renewable energy sources, streamlines the approval process for projects of less than 15KW, and works with stakeholders to determine a sustainable future for Vermont utilities with regards to renewable energy. Sweeping through the House early on in the session with a 138-8 vote, H.702 passed the Senate with a 28-0 vote in March, helping to bring Vermont forward with continued action around energy conservation in response to the impacts of climate change. VBSR was the largest business association to support this legislation.

Economic Development

Designated Growth Centers (H.823)

VBSR businesses were in strong support of a bill that would provide better opportunity for affordable housing while protecting natural resources. H.823 encourages more concentrated growth in designated downtown areas with guidelines for protecting critical environmental conditions. The bill conveys a comprehensive economic development strategy expanding opportunity while respecting a balance with environmental conservation.

Jobs Bill (S.220)

A compromise bill between the economic development committees of the House and Senate, this omnibus bill includes changes to the state's worker compensation laws, a boost to the state's workforce development and training programs, increased access to credit for small businesses, and the launch of a loan forgiveness program for some new college graduates who get a job in Vermont after finishing school.

Minimum Wage (H.552)

Vermont's plan to reach a \$10.50 an hour minimum wage by 2018 puts the state above President Obama's plan to raise the federal minimum wage to \$10.10 an hour. With a graduated plan to arrive at this rate, the current baseline wage of \$8.73 will be raised to \$9.15 in 2015. VBSR supports not only an increase in the minimum wage but the promotion of a livable wage for all Vermonters and feels that it makes economic sense for Vermont businesses and working families. VBSR was the only business association to support this legislation.

Food and Environment

GMO Labeling (H.112)

Vermont is officially the first state in the nation to require the labeling of genetically engineered foods. A huge step in promoting consumer's right to know, VBSR thanks our members for their strong support through numerous testimonies, press events and continued feedback on the benefits of this bill. With broad public support, Vermont will lead what may continue as a trend in giving consumers basic information about what they eat as an estimated two dozen states are also considering GMO labeling bills. A big win for the bill's supporters, Gov. Shumlin announced that he would sign the bill into law shortly after the final vote on the House floor. On May 8th a ceremony was held on the Statehouse lawn to celebrate the victory of getting this bill onto the Governor's desk, which was brought outside into the sunshine for everyone to witness the signing! VBSR was the only business association to support this legislation.

Toxic Substances (S.239)

Toxic chemical reform will take a step forward as S.239 was passed by strong margins both in the House and the Senate but with substantial amendments from its original introduction. The bill was written with the intent to implement regulation that would require the removal of toxic substances from everyday, household products to protect public health and provide a market for safer, greener products. Lack of precedence from other states around regulation and challenges with manufacturing processes redirected the focus of regulation on products marketed to or sold for use by children under 12. VBSR was the only business association to support this legislation.

People and Communities

Publicly Funded Pre-K (H.270)

Vermont has passed a bill to provide equitable access to pre-k education for all children. The bill delivers a statewide tuition rate to aid programs, parents, and school districts in predicting costs and revenue driving a simplified payment and oversight process for early childhood education. Investing in early childhood education is economic development. VBSR member businesses support the wise investments this bill outlines for our education dollars.

Many of VBSR's letters and testimony to the Legislature can be read in the Public Policy section of VBSR's website: www.vbsr.org.

Founded in 1990, VBSR is a non-profit, statewide business trade organization with a mission to advance business ethics that value multiple bottom lines: economic, social, and environmental. We strive to help members set a high standard for protecting the natural, human and economic environments of the state's residents, while remaining profitable. We advance VBSR's mission through education, public influence and workplace quality. www.vbsr.org