

Burlington Mayor Miro Weinberger's 2023 Legislative Priorities

The City of Burlington is facing numerous, serious challenges that the Administration seeks to work with the Scott Administration and the Legislature on in the upcoming session. Mayor Weinberger will be advocating for action on the following initiatives:

- **State assistance for PCB remediation and regional technical center funding.** Burlington taxpayers should not be forced to bear all of the \$20+ million cost of the state-required PCB clean-up at the site of the former high school, or the full \$20+ million cost of new regional technical center facilities. We are seeking State support from the PCB clean-up fund and from the projected current year Education Fund surplus.
- **State support for local efforts to address substantial statewide increases in violent crime and property crime.** Mayor Weinberger is seeking urgent action from the state on numerous fronts:
 - Recruitment and retention of police officers: The policing profession is facing a historic loss of officers from early retirements and unprecedented challenges in recruiting new officers. Vermont's cities need state assistance in creating alternatives to the traditional, residential-only police academy to reduce barriers to hiring law enforcement within our own diverse communities, and new financial incentives for officer recruitment and retention. The Legislature and the Governor should provide resources, oversight, and accountability to the Vermont Criminal Justice Council as needed regarding the Council's existing plan to study and advance non-residential training for law enforcement officers.
 - Strengthened gun safety laws: In response to a dramatic increase in gun violence throughout the state new legislation is needed that:
 - Requires the safe storage of firearms: Of the 17 guns used in gunfire incidents that Burlington Police have seized pursuant to investigations into the 26 gunfire incidents in 2022, 6 were stolen. The lack of safe storage requirements in Vermont undermines recent reforms to require background checks and prohibit the sale of guns to persons under 21 years of age. All other New England states have safe storage legislation, and in 2014, 61% of Burlington voters backed a safe storage charter change proposed by Mayor Weinberger.
 - Prohibits guns in bars, restaurants, and other sensitive spaces. Burlington has experienced bar-related gun violence for years. During the spike in gunfire incidents over the past two years, approximately 20% of the incidents have been bar-related. Currently, 11 states ban guns in bars including rural states like Alaska, Kentucky, and North Dakota. In 2014, 68% of Burlington voters backed a safe storage charter change proposed by Mayor Weinberger.
 - Makes reckless endangerment with a gun a felony. Several states have felony charges for reckless conduct that specifically endangers the lives of others, including Vermont's neighbors, New Hampshire and New York; the lack of it in Vermont has complicated efforts to hold individuals accountable for recent gunfire incidents that gravely threatened bystanders.
 - Funds research on gun violence. To create effective policy and gun violence prevention measures, we need better data and research to understand how guns are being accessed, used, and trafficked for the commission of a crime in Vermont. Part of California's effective strategy to reduce gun violence has included a state-funded Firearm Violence Research Center at the University of California, Davis. Vermont should fund a similar program that would be responsible for collecting and analyzing

statewide data to propose gun safety policies and prevention strategies to reduce gun violence.

- Strengthened property crime laws: Burlington is experiencing a spike in property crime that is undermining public safety in our neighborhoods and threatening the vitality of our downtown. Mayor Weinberger is seeking state assistance with these challenges through:
 - Modernization of shoplifting statutes. Our merchants are experiencing huge losses from shoplifting, and law enforcement reports high recidivism of people who perpetrate retail theft. Vermont's current statute for the crimes of petit larceny and grand larceny are antiquated and do not reflect the modern realities of retail environments, or our values of restorative and alternative justice.
 - Increase funding of the Victims Compensation Fund. Most states, including Vermont, provide financial support to victims of crime. However, the State's fund provides limited restitution for victims of property crimes and there are high barriers to accessing the funds. The State should expand the eligibility parameters of the Victims Compensation Fund and allocate funds to municipalities to establish or expand local funds.
- **State support for local efforts to address the housing shortage.** The housing crisis that has been building for decades is now at an acute stage that demands urgent action at all levels of government. The State Legislature could help with this by eliminating the single biggest regulatory barrier to the creation of new homes in Burlington: the redundant layer of state permitting imposed by Act 250's land use regulation of the development projects that occur in the City. This additional review, which has not been comprehensively revised since its inception fifty years ago, costs every project hundreds of thousands of dollars in professional time and fees, months of valuable time, and discourages some builders from even considering much-needed projects at all. This wasteful double review ultimately drives up the cost of housing not just for the builders, but for all of us. Legislators have known about this acute problem for years, but have refused to fix it without a comprehensive reform of Act 250. As we suffer through an intensified housing crisis with staggering levels of homelessness, large rent increases, and historically low housing availability, it is clear we are long past the time for the State to remove this major housing barrier - especially in areas that have been planned and designated for growth at the local, regional, and state levels.
- **State funding for initiatives to end homelessness.** Burlington and Chittenden County are currently facing unprecedented levels of homelessness. In response, Burlington has created a Special Assistant to End Homelessness and devoted millions of dollars of ARPA funds to this issue, but Burlington cannot do this alone and we need the State to better fund and operate the parts of the system that it is responsible for. Mayor Weinberger is seeking state action that:
 - Plans for the end of the motel voucher program. The state urgently must create a plan, coordinated with municipalities, for the end of the current hotel voucher program including funding for new transitional, supportive housing units.
 - Creates new funding for permanent (non-time-limited) supportive housing services. The federal Continuum of Care funding Burlington receives allows for rental assistance for permanent supportive housing. Every year, our community returns significant unused rental assistance funds because we are unable to fund the permanent supportive housing services (and identify units) that must be paired with it.
 - Funds additional case management services. Providers working with our Coordinated Entry System report long delays in being able to link homeless individuals and households with housing navigators.

- **State action to address fentanyl and meth misuse and mental health needs.** The City has made unprecedented investments with the addition of social workers at the police department, by funding a new program to serve justice-involved individuals, and by innovating a public health approach to homelessness by creating the Elmwood Avenue Emergency Shelter with comprehensive services for all guests. We need the State to take similar urgent action on the opioid and mental health crises. After many years of debate, it is critical that the state act this year to:
 - Provide specialized care for violent individuals. Vermont’s patients, communities, and hospitals need space for safe, specialized care for violent individuals. People involved with the judicial system for violent behavior deserve the right care, at the right time, by the right professional caregivers. Vermont’s Emergency Departments are not equipped to provide this type of care, and staff have been injured. Up-fitting (both physical space and adding necessary staff) four of the existing (vacant) beds at Vermont’s Psychiatric Care Hospital for evaluation, stabilization and treatment would ensure patient needs are met by the best-equipped providers in a space designed for the safe delivery of care.

Fentanyl and meth have become the dominant drugs in Chittenden County and have dramatically undermined the effectiveness of our Substance Misuse treatment systems, resulting in a tragic record number of overdose deaths in 2022. Major action from the state is needed to:

- Improve access to Medications for Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD); including a second methadone treatment hub in Chittenden County.
 - Accelerate responses to growing methamphetamine use, such as by expanding the Contingency Management pilot currently underway in Chittenden County.
 - Expand re-entry support for justice-involved individuals with substance use disorder, we know that this population is at a significantly increased risk of death by overdose.
 - Expand residential treatment opportunities, including both long-term treatment and short-term treatment for fentanyl-addicted users entering MOUD.
 - Remove barriers at the State level to the creation of Overdose Prevention Sites.
- **Advancing Climate Action and Electrification.** Burlington has among the most ambitious climate action policies in the nation. Even with unprecedented federal action in 2022 and the City’s new regulatory authority for thermal heating systems, we need State support to stay on track to achieve Net Zero by 2030. Mayor Weinberger is advocating for forward-thinking statewide climate policy that:
 - Extends Act 151, which sunsets in 2023, to allow efficiency programs such as Burlington Electric’s to continue to spend a portion of funds on greenhouse gas emissions reduction initiatives (such as stronger heat pump rebates, multi-family EV charging infrastructure, and geothermal test wells).
 - Strengthens the Renewable Energy Standard (RES) and ensures that any changes to the RES are analyzed fully and determined to be cost-effective for ratepayers. To support momentum for the electrification of thermal heating and transportation sectors energy rates should be kept as low as possible. The State should continue to recognize exemptions in existing law for utilities such as Burlington Electric, Swanton, and Washington Electric that are already 100% renewable, to avoid adding cost for utility customers.
 - Protect Burlington’s authority to regulate thermal systems. Last session, the Legislature and Governor approved a charter change giving Burlington the ability to regulate thermal systems in the building, and we will be seeking the approval of voters to create a Carbon Pollution Fee for new construction and large buildings this coming Town Meeting Day. State efforts to cap local energy code requirements should continue to support Burlington’s efforts in this area.

Additionally, Mayor Weinberger will advocate for statewide policy that:

- Supports expanded access to affordable high-quality child care.
- Modernizes public meeting law to allow remote meetings.
- Requires state tax department to itemize cannabis sales tax revenues for municipalities so that revenues can be dedicated to racial justice and equity initiatives.
- Continues funding for Green Mountain Transit and public transportation.