

2019 State Legislative Session Recap

From Sen. Justin Chenette (Dist. 31: Saco, Old Orchard Beach, Hollis, Limington, Buxton)

Since 2012, I've been a proud member of the Biddeford-Saco Chamber of Commerce. We have a great local resource looking out for the best interest of our small businesses and our community. The work of this organization amplifies the contributions of our hardworking men and women throughout our local economy.

At the Chamber's request, I am providing a brief legislative update from the state house now that the session has officially wrapped up. We marked a new era this past session of the legislature. The statehouse was filled with civility, respect, and mutual cooperation. Even when we ultimately disagreed based on our values, it was never personal. Treating people who you disagree with the way you want to be treated, as fellow human beings not as a D or R, lays a foundation of being able to work through more difficult issues later.

Unlike Congress, we are constitutionally obligated to balance our budget and are required to obtain 2/3rds support in both chambers of the legislature in order to pass it. Our state constitution was written that way to ensure fiscal restraint and bipartisan accountability in government. No budget can pass without the support from the minority party... 104-38 in the House and 25-9 in the Senate were the votes to pass the budget. Moreover, there were over 1,154 individual votes on budget lines during the budget negotiation process on the Appropriations Committee and 99 percent of those votes were unanimous votes between Democrats and Republicans.

Some highlights of the budget include: \$130 million in property tax relief for Mainers. This includes increasing revenue sharing to 3% in 2020 and 3.75% in 2021, increasing the Homestead Exemption by \$5,000 up to \$25,000, and expanding the Property Tax Fairness Credit to include an additional 13,000 Mainers. We added \$111 million in additional state funds for local education funding. We made critical investments to advance workforce training and higher education including \$600,000 for adult education, \$2 million for adult degree completion and \$3 million for early college. The budget restores the low-cost Drugs for Maine's Elderly program to cover an additional 800 seniors while combatting the opioid crisis with \$5.5 million towards prevention and treatment efforts.

As Chair of the bipartisan Government Oversight Committee and a member of the Senate Ethics Committee, my priority has been to increase transparency, accountability, and ethics in state government. To restore a sense of trust and credibility back into the institution by putting government on the side of the people.

I introduced a comprehensive ethics reform package which included three different proposals: 1) Tackled the revolving door of lawmakers becoming lobbyists by ensuring a one-year ban or waiting period after legislative service prior to employment as a compensated lobbyist. Passed unanimously in the House and Senate and signed into law by the Governor.

2) After an ethics scandal involving a Senate leader's political action committee last session, my PAC reform bill prevents legislators from turning their PACs into personal or business slush funds. This also passed unanimously in the House and Senate and was signed into law by the Governor.

3) My campaign finance bill that bans lobbyist contributions to legislative and gubernatorial candidates passed both chambers and currently awaits the Governor's signature.

This package is an effort to limit undue influence and ensure your voices are heard over those who write the largest check. Legislators are supposed to be the peoples' lobbyist.

As a member of the Environment & Natural Resources Committee, I've been on the front lines of protecting our natural resources-based economy which is so critical to our livelihoods. From working with grocers to ban single-use plastic bags to upgrading the quality of our rivers to banning offshore oil drilling, there are a number of important environmental initiatives that preserve the essence of Maine. My bill defining water as a basic, public, human right under state law also passed and was signed. Legislation mitigating and preventing further impacts of climate change were prioritized and passed including the Governor's Climate Council and investments in solar energy and EV rebates.

I also had luck this session in passing a bill to comprehensively overhaul our bullying laws working closely with our Education Commissioner who grew up in Saco. The bill directs the creation of a stakeholder group to collect data and report out specific recommendations to address lingering issues, from a lack of reporting bullying incidents to resources and support for schools on prevention and intervention tactics.

For chamber members, it should also be noted that I was appointed by Senate President Troy Jackson to serve as a Commissioner on the Citizen Trade Policy Commission. The Citizen Trade Policy Commission (CTPC) is a government agency that studies and advises the legal and economic impacts of trade agreements on existing laws, working conditions and businesses in Maine. CTPC commissioners hold meetings throughout the state to provide a forum for citizens and business owners to voice their concerns and to protect Maine's jobs from the negative impact of trade agreements.

This next month I will be in Cambridge, MA at Harvard University's Kennedy School for an academic fellowship in their Senior Executives in State & Local Government, learning from colleagues across the country and best practices that can be used locally in this position.

Overall there were over 2,100 pieces of legislation that were introduced, debated, and decided on. I'm proud of the work done this session that puts Maine on a path to success on all cylinders. Know that you can reach out to me anytime you have an issue, question, or need assistance with a state department/program. You can email me, Facebook me, Tweet me, or call me. My email is justinchenette@gmail.com and my office number is 207-287-1515. I look forward to seeing you all around our community at our next event with Saco Main Street or at an upcoming chamber function.