

**Vermont State Workforce Development Board**

Agricultural Committee - Meeting Minutes

February 27, 2023

4:00 – 5:00 pm

**Committee Members in Attendance**: Alyson Eastman, Jed Davis, Joe Tisbert, Roy Beckford, Kiersten Bourgeois, Brian Carpenter

**Guests in Attendance**: Victoria Biondolillo, Abigail Rhim

Victoria Biondolillo called the meeting to order at 4:04 pm. She informed the committee of the State Workforce Development Board’s strategic plan which will outline benchmarks and strategies of the committee (to be distributed to the committee as a “one-pager”). She emphasized the goal of the strategic plan is to ensure that committee meetings are productive and designed to work towards tangible goals. She then shared the plan of today’s committee meeting: “housekeeping,” introducing the one-pager to the committee and providing them with the opportunity for edits and feedback. The process of editing the one-pager will repeat until the committee agrees upon the scope of what they will be working on. The one-pager will then be put into the larger strategic plan to be voted on in the May meeting of the State Workforce Development Board.

*Housekeeping*

Victoria Biondolillo and Abigail Rhim have been sending out bi-weekly updates on the legislature. They also have office hours on Fridays for committee and board members. Victoria Biondolillo shared that the members of the committee will be added to the list of recipients for the biweekly legislative updates and are welcome to attend office hours as they please (committee members are also welcome to schedule meetings outside of the office hours). The main goal is to keep the committee in the loop of what is going on in the legislature and receive their thoughts and opinions. Victoria Biondolillo then opened the floor to questions from the committee.

Jed Davis then raised a question about the time of office hours on Fridays. Abigail Rhim stated that office hours would take place from 10:00 am to 11:00 am on Fridays.

Roy Beckford asked if it would be easier if a shared folder was created for the “back-and-forth.” Victoria Biondolillo responded that she can create a shared folder for the committee and State Workforce Development Board. She reiterated that no one is *required* to provide feedback, but she would like for the committee to “dictate the focus” of their work.

*One-Pager*

Abigail Rhim presented an example of the one-pager to the committee. Victoria Biondolillo highlighted the key points of the one-pager:

* Agriculture is a large part of the Vermont economy.
* Agriculture is critical to the Vermont economy.
* Employers in Vermont’s agricultural sector (e.g., farm owners) are struggling to place people into jobs.
* The State Workforce Development Board is struggling to find workers who are available and interested in taking jobs in the agricultural sector.
* The worker shortage in the industry is causing pressure on price levels, the overhead of business operators, and is straining Vermont farms.

Victoria Biondolillo continued reviewing the one-pager by highlighting the State Workforce Development Board’s proposed solution to the shortage of workers in the agriculture industry:

* The principal long-term strategy is engaging the youth to create pipelines for workers to enter the agriculture industry.
* Short-term solutions could include hiring foreign labor or addressing supply chain bottlenecks in the industry.

Victoria Biondolillo then opened the floor to questions and comments from the committee.

Roy Beckford asked if it would be helpful to have “some sense of where the information and the situation comes from.” Victoria Biondolillo stated the information comes from data collected by the State of Vermont. Additionally, the one-pager is informed by conversations the State Workforce Development Board has had with Vermonters involved in the industry.

Roy Beckford proposed to use the term “food security” or “food resiliency” in the one-pager. He also highlighted that Vermont has lost 32% of its total cropland since 1987, saying if the committee is going to be serious about food resiliency, that loss of cropland should be captured in the one-pager. Victoria Biondolillo concurred that it was important information for the one-pager. She went on to say that any data any committee members may have that they believe to be relevant or useful can be incorporated into the one-pager.

Victoria Biondolillo then went through milestones for the committee in the one-pager, outlining several main “tracks”:

1. Youth development
2. Mapping out resources for hiring foreign labor. She emphasized the committee’s role in demystifying this process, saying she has found that the process is incredibly complicated. The committee should work on putting together an “employer toolkit” for hiring foreign labor, which might have ripple effects for other committees trying to work on the process of hiring foreign labor in other industries.

Deputy Secretary Eastman interjected with an example of a specific example: an individual has attended school in the United States, would like to work on a farm here, but is from a country which is not approved to travel through the H-2A or H-2B visa programs. The committee is trying to figure out if that individual could instead work in Vermont on an EB-3 visa program and potentially become a permanent resident. Deputy Secretary Eastman has found there are not many professionals in the state of Vermont who work on the EB-3 visa program (or others like it). She also refers to the two-year parole program which is something the committee has also been working on.

Victoria Biondolillo responded that an issue which the State Workforce Development Board has encountered is that the Agency of Commerce does not know what to do with people from other countries because those people need to complete the visa process before they can apply for work or Vermont state programs.

She went on to refocus on youth development: the committee should develop several outreach programs for young Vermont students of different ages (e.g., a program for elementary schoolers, middle schoolers, high schoolers, and at older ages, pairing the outreach programs with work-based training and on-the-job training and youth fund). At older ages, the state already has programs to pair students with employers who are interested in taking on interns or young workers. However, these programs are not being accessed by agricultural employers. So, the committee should work on marketing these existing programs as well.

She then discusses CDL Licenses, highlighting the importance of marketing them, explaining how they work, and generally growing the pool of people who are interested in this type of work.

In the long run, the goal of the committee should be to eventually host programs for students who might be interested in agricultural work to educate them on the job opportunities in Vermont, so that when the time comes for them to plan for their career, they will be aware that there is a company or farm in Vermont which can meet their needs.

Roy Beckford then interjected to say, “if we don’t have to reinvent the wheel, we shouldn’t.” He says that the 4-H program does a lot of outreach work with K-12 students (and beyond that) already. He suggests a collaboration between the 4-H program and the committee.

Victoria Biondolillo responded that the committee might not be the ones doing the actual programming. Instead, they could identify partners like 4-H to expose more students to them.

Deputy Secretary Eastman encouraged the committee to look at work-based learning to engage students at 16 or 17 years old and allow them to earn money as students. She even says that by the second half of their senior year, some students can work as full-time employees if they have completed all their required classes in the first half of the school year.

Victoria Biondolillo responded that developing more of these programs would be a great project for the committee.

Joe Tisbert asked if the committee knows how many workers are needed in the sector.

Victoria Biondolillo said she does not have the number off the top of her head, but she can work to get an idea of the number. She estimated it was in the thousands.

Joe Tisbert asked Deputy Secretary Eastman what the best way was to develop the work-based learning programs across the state.

Deputy Secretary Eastman responded that the programs should be done out of the high schools. High schoolers can work to develop hours towards their apprenticeships. As soon as they graduate from high school, they can go work for the employer they have been.

Victoria Biondolillo carried on that the work-based learning programs are designed so that the employer can receive funding to pay some of the high school employees. She thinks work-based learning because students can learn-by-doing, and it takes pressure off employers by allowing them to afford interns to help with menial tasks.

Joe Tisbert said he will have the counties reach out to their high schools to “see what’s available for farms” so farmers can be made aware of how they could receive help.

Victoria Biondolillo said that if committee members receive questions about the programs from farmers, her and Abigail Rhim would be happy to help answer them and that many of the same workforce development programs available to businesses are also available to farmers.

Brian Carpenter suggested that in crafting “The Situation” paragraph in the one-pager, it will be important to define the complete sector the committee is working with. He suggested including an overview of the size and quantity of segments within Vermont’s agriculture industry in that paragraph. He also discussed the support network for businesses, saying that the committee should focus their work and ensure they understand what they are talking about. He expressed his feeling that the agriculture industry is minimized when he is testifying at the State House.

Victoria Biondolillo said that was good feedback which should be incorporated. She continued that due to the minimization of agriculture, people do not fully comprehend the importance of the agriculture industry in Vermont.

Deputy Secretary Eastman offered for Victoria Biondolillo to meet with “two key policy folks at the agency” to coordinate on writing “The Situation” paragraph.

Victoria Biondolillo agreed that would be a good idea.

Kiersten Bourgeois asked if forestry was a part of the one-pager?

Deputy Secretary Eastman said that sometimes, forestry is part of agriculture because maple syrup that comes from trees falls under the purview of agriculture.

Kiersten Bourgeois suggested that forestry should be considered by the committee to be included in the one-pager.

Victoria Biondolillo said the vision of the one-pager should be somewhat broad so that it is applicable to other industries (i.e., something regarding agriculture, if it is kept broad, could apply to forestry and various other industries).

Brian Carpenter asked if there are programs for foreign laborers to receive full time work that employers could be made aware of.

Victoria Biondolillo said these programs do in fact exist., as visa programs are much more diverse than many people and businesses are aware of.

Deputy Secretary Eastman said the committee could do a better job of working with Vermont’s colleges on recruiting foreign laborers because many visas require secondary education. She also said if businesses want to higher migrant workers, Vermont should have a “one-stop-shop” where businesses can go to receive referrals for foreign professionals in various fields. Agencies like this exist at the federal level, but Deputy Secretary Eastman believes Vermont should develop a better system for this.

Victoria Biondolillo said it would make sense to include Ellen Kahler, who is on the State Workforce Development Board, in some committee conversations about a new system for employers finding foreign labor.

Victoria Biondolillo outlined next steps to end the meeting: sending out the one-pager along with information regarding office hours and providing a deadline for submission of edits before the next meeting. She once again emphasized that “nothing is off the table” in terms of changes to the one-pager. She also discussed the logistics of how changes to the one-pager will actually happen.

Meeting adjourned at 4:42 pm

Respectfully submitted by Nicholas Kebo

-----------------------------------------------------------------

Nicholas Kebo, Intern, Office of Governor Phil Scott