

Dear House Colleagues,

We are in unprecedented times. From the scale of the health crisis faced by our state, country, and world, to sudden and widespread economic devastation, it is clear now more than ever that we must work together. This requires that we listen deeply and compassionately to differing viewpoints and commit to finding compromise that place the safety, well-being and economic security of Vermonters as our highest collective priority.

Tropical Storm Irene was a disaster that happened with little warning. We woke up one morning to clear devastation and pulled together in recovery efforts. This crisis will demand far more because it is unfolding before us- the surge of critical patients, the grief, and hardest-felt economic impacts are yet to come. This is a crisis that requires cool heads and careful planning. On March 12 we turned our attention to COVID-19 and became the first state legislative chamber in the country to pass a response package. We pulled together resources for our constituents, channeled communications to get timely answers to questions from the Administration and Federal delegation, set up new ways for legislative work to continue in an open, accessible process, and worked together across party lines and branches of government for Vermonters.

Nearly every member took advantage of the multiple opportunities to participate in the process leading up to yesterday's floor session. The House Rules Committee, joined by Progressive caucus leadership and a representative of the Independents, discussed how we should proceed with legislative business under public health guidelines from the Center for Disease Control, during this declared emergency. Though we held differing concerns and priorities, we were united in finding an inclusive path to allow our legislative work, rooted in centuries of rules and traditions, as well as Constitutional constraints, to continue in a way that protects public health. The resulting resolutions, and discussions on how to pass them, were not crafted easily or taken lightly. We followed the laws and legislative rules that govern committee process. Each member of leadership reached out to their respective members to share information and solicit input.

Yesterday's floor session was critical in getting help to Vermonters and establishing a way for the legislature to lead through this crisis. We designed a plan to pass legislation in a way that reduced the community spread of COVID-19. A procedural motion forced 100 people- a generous quorum of members, plus staff, and press- to gather against CDC recommendations, less than 24 hours after the Governor's stay-at-home order and at a time when infection rates are increasing exponentially in Vermont. Democrats, Republicans, Progressives and Independents had consensus, transparency and opportunities for engagement leading up to yesterday. Yet one member unnecessarily required every other member to choose between their duty to Vermont and the health and safety of their communities, peers, and loved ones at home. Being a legislator requires that we know the rules. True public service requires the wisdom to know when to use them. Yesterday's quorum call was not wise.

I have consulted with Representative Janet Ancel, Chair of the House Committee on Ways and Means, on the complex and difficult work facing that committee over the coming months and likely continuing into next year. She and I agree that this work demands a diverse group of thinkers across the political spectrum who can work as a team for the good of the state. In addition to an understanding of tax policy, committee members must work well with others towards a common purpose, question others respectfully, exercise careful judgement and accept that democracy demands finding value in others' concerns and priorities, not just their own position. I cannot stress enough how critical this is for legislative responsiveness to this unprecedented time. Therefore, under the authority of the Speaker to

appoint committees, I am removing Representative Browning from the Committee on Ways and Means and appointing Representative Emilie Kornheiser of Brattleboro to serve on that committee effective immediately.

My priorities are: partnering with the Governor's Office, Senate Pro Tempore, and House leadership to protect the well-being of Vermont, coordinating the work of House committees, managing the tremendous change in the platform of our meetings, ensuring all members have access to and comfort with our new processes, tending to my own constituent work and serving the needs of my family during this stressful time.

Mitzi Johnson
Speaker of the House