

## **Bill would let heavy trucks on highways**

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BRATTLEBORO - U.S. Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., has introduced federal legislation to permanently move trucks between 80,000 and 100,000 pounds off Vermont's secondary routes and back onto the interstate highway system.

Leahy introduced legislation earlier this week with U.S. Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, to make a now-expired federal pilot program to allow heavy trucks to use Interstates 89 and 91 within the Green Mountain State.

The legislation, Senate bill No. 112, to authorize the application of state law with respect to vehicle weight limitations on the interstate highway system in Vermont and Maine, was referred to the Committee on Environment and Public Works on Tuesday.

"The higher truck weight standards in surrounding states create problems in Vermont when those trucks have to detour through our small towns on local roads," Leahy said Tuesday. The senator was joined by lawmakers and trucking advocates in South Burlington to announce the introduction of the new bill.

"The hodgepodge of disjointed rules that has evolved in our region does not work for anyone, especially the communities that have had to absorb the added traffic. By now, neighbors like New York, New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Quebec all have permanent exemptions from federal interstate weight limits," Leahy added.

Collins said Maine businesses face a competitive disadvantage because of the weight restriction.

"Vermont faces the same disadvantage.

I am pleased that Vermont Sen. Patrick Leahy has joined me in co-sponsoring this bipartisan legislation," she said. "The pilot program made a dramatic improvement in some of our communities." Secretary Brian Searles of the Vermont Agency of Transportation said his department was very supportive of the measure and offered to contact national transit officials to help the process in the future.

"We come down on the side of protecting our historic downtowns and village centers, which we think are at risk if we're putting more and heavier trucks through them on a daily basis," Searles said. VTrans also wants to ensure Vermont does not become an island in terms of commerce, especially since all the neighboring states have higher weight standards, he added.

The one-year-old program for Vermont and Maine, which turned vehicles weighing more than 80,000 pounds onto the interstate system, expired on Dec. 17 and brought large trucks back through downtowns and stateowned routes. "It was definitively a success for the towns. People I've talked to who live downtown definitively realize the difference," said State Rep. Mollie Burke, a Brattleboro Progressive and member of the

House Transportation Committee. "I think it's a great idea that they're going forward with something that won't get tangled up in another bill."

The program evaluated the effect on highway safety, truck volume and commerce, but it was also attached to an omnibus spending bill derailed by congressional Republicans at the last minute in the fiscal 2011 budget bill on Dec. 16, allowing it to expire the following day.

"That means heavier trucks must travel over our smaller roadways, creating traffic and safety concerns and taking a toll on our already overburdened roads and bridges," Leahy said. "The Vermont pilot program has proved itself, and it's time to make it permanent."

Trucking advocates pushed for the program's extension to allow heavier tractor trailers back on the interstate highways earlier this month before the House Transportation Committee. Proponents said truckers reduced mileage by up to 10 percent by avoiding downtown lights and lower speed limits on stateowned roads, such as Route 5 in Vermont.

Matt Cota, executive director of the Vermont Fuel Dealers Association, said Vermonters use roughly 150 million gallons of heating fuel annually, transported by large trucks, with a majority of it in the three coldest months of the year.

In the next six weeks, Cota estimates residents will use 30 million gallons of oil or propane, which is approximately 7,000 tanker loads of fuel.

"Those are tanker loads, as of now, that would be over the 80,000 pound limit and [they] have to use the state roads but not the interstate system," Cota said. "This is a product that we need, and we need a lot of it when its cold. These trucks have no choice."

During Tuesday's conference in South Burlington, Champlain Oil Company Vice-President Bryan Cairns said the program saved his business 43,400 gallons of diesel fuel and this trucks raveled 320,000 fewer miles.

Federal law presently restrict trucks weighing more than 80,000 pounds from regularly using the nationwide interstate highway system. However, portions of the network allow higherweight trucks to operate under special circumstances (such as tolls and grandfather clauses).

Those exceptions in other states, in addition to Vermont's current ban on interstate highways, has resulted in more congestion on smaller routes and extra pressure on aging roads and bridges.

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