

## Hungarian politician visits Addison County

By MARIN HOWELL  
STARKSBORO — Five Hungarians traveled to Vermont late last month to experience much more than the state's seasonal offerings of leaf peeping and apple picking.

All members of the Hungarian National Assembly, the parliamentarians were here on an Open World trip sponsored by the Vermont Council on World Affairs. Starksboro residents Brad Johnson and Ellen Yount were among those who hosted members of the group.

"I've benefited from people in other countries who have hosted me over the years, so it's satisfying to be able to give back in some fashion," Johnson said of his decision to host. "I love Vermont, so it's a lot of fun getting to show Vermont off to somebody who otherwise may not have come here."



HUNGARIAN PARLIAMENTARIAN BALÁZS BARKÓCZY explores Bristol's Main Street during his trip to Vermont last month. Barkóczy was visiting Addison County as part of an Open World trip sponsored by the Vermont Council on World Affairs and was hosted by Starksboro residents Brad Johnson and Ellen Yount.

Photo courtesy of Brad Johnson

Johnson and his family hosted Balázs Barkóczy, a member of the Democratic Coalition, or DK, party in Hungary. Barkóczy was elected in April to serve a four-year term in parliament. He is one of 12 DK members to sit in the country's 199-person National Assembly, which is dominated by the conservative Fidesz party.

Barkóczy said through a translator that he chose to participate in the Open World program to learn more about the United States, a country he had not visited before this trip. Additionally, he hoped to learn more about America's political system and how political practices work in a country with more established

democratic traditions.

He said he's glad the trip brought him to the Green Mountain State, as each year a different community in the United States hosts Open World participants.

"I'm very happy that we did get a chance to visit Vermont because this is a way for us to learn not just about the central and federal (political) system but all of America," he said.

During the 10-day program, Barkóczy and other participants met with elected officials in Washington, D.C., visited the Vermont Statehouse and spoke with various state officials about their work in sustaining a healthy democracy.

"To me it seems that the way of practicing politics is a much clearer and much more professional way in the United States, which I believe makes political practices much more predictable," he said of his impression of American politics. "They don't work the same way in Hungary, politics is much more chaotic and nontransparent in my country."

Barkóczy also got to see local democracy in action at a Mount Abraham Unified School District board meeting. Johnson serves on the board as a Starksboro representative.

"I was very impressed by the fact that people seem to have real ownership of the issues that come up at the school board meeting, and that they strive to find solutions together to come up with shared solutions to the problems," he said. "That I think is a celebration of democracy, and it leads to a healthier society."

In addition to learning about Vermont politics and public administration, Barkóczy enjoyed exploring Addison County and getting to know his hosts.

"The everyday things that I saw, having a good breakfast in Bristol with Brad and then going to see a (Babe Ruth) high school baseball game. I think this was a much more in-depth glimpse into the way of life in Vermont than if I had only met with politicians," he said. "Most importantly I go back having made a very good friend."

Prior to his return to Hungary last week, Barkóczy said he planned to bring a few lessons from his trip back to his work in the Hungarian parliament.

"(For example) the sense of community and the community approach to politics, which is definitely an everyday notion here. Not just in politics, but in every other aspect of life," he said.

Barkóczy isn't the only one who found his visit impactful. Johnson said enjoyed watching Vermonters hear and react to Barkóczy's perspective on local politics and hopes these discussions have lasting impacts.

"Having different perspectives on how we organize our lives and our society helps both of us. It helps Balázs when he goes home to look at how Hungary does things through a slightly different prism," he said.

Johnson added that he hopes Barkóczy's trip has an impact on Vermonters as well.

"For example, in the school board case, not taking for granted being blessed with having local control of our schools and understanding that that is something to be valued,"



BALÁZS BARKÓCZY STANDS outside of the Vermont Statehouse in Montpelier. The Hungarian parliamentarian was invited to the seat of Vermont government to speak with the state's elected officials during his trip to the Green Mountain State.

Photo courtesy of Brad Johnson

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## Bivalent vaccine numbers are lagging

By ERIN PETENKO, VTDigger  
MONTPELIER — About 26,000 Vermonters have gotten the Omicron booster, putting the state on a slower pace than previous booster campaigns, according to data from the state Department of Health.

Vermont pharmacies, health providers and walk-in clinics began offering the booster, also called the bivalent vaccine, to the general population three weeks ago — in 2021, more than 100,000 people got the booster in the first three weeks after Vermont opened eligibility to high-risk people and people 65 and older.

Anne Sosin, a health equity researcher at Dartmouth College, said it was still "relatively early" in the campaign, especially since people who have recently contracted Covid are recommended to wait until their immunity wears off.

But she said there were "reasons for concern" about the slow uptake, given that the United States has had "increasing incoherence in (its) Covid response."

In a "60 Minutes" interview earlier this month, President Joe Biden said the pandemic was "over," leading to criticism from some public health experts and officials.

"There's been consistent refrains that the pandemic is over, that Covid represents a low risk, and so many don't really see the reason to get boosted at this moment in time," Sosin said. "We really need an active effort to counter that messaging."

Vermont isn't the only state that has struggled with its latest booster campaign: Less than 2% of eligible Americans got the shot in

the first three weeks of the rollout, according to data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The bivalent booster dose targets the Omicron strain along with older strains of the virus. Experts say it provides increased protection against the variants currently circulating throughout the country.

Sosin pointed out that not only does the vaccine defend against severe outcomes — like hospitalization and death — but it could play a role in limiting the virus' disruption of schools, workplaces and communities when Vermonters get sick.

"While older populations will incur the most health benefits, there are real reasons for young people to boost this fall," Sosin said.

Almost half of the bivalent vaccine recipients were Vermonters 65 and older, health department data shows.

Recent vaccine campaigns have seen lower and lower uptake, both for boosters and for the newly eligible group of young children. Before the bivalent vaccine became available, only 37% of Vermonters were up to date on their vaccines, including recommended booster doses, according to the health department vaccine dashboard.

Monica Ogleby, chief of the immunization program at the health department, said the number of bivalent boosters was in line with their expectations, given the "pretty consistent trend" that as "new vaccines come out, the uptick in demand might look a little bit different, a little bit lower each time."

They are still "assuming, hoping (and) planning" for about 50 to 60% of eligible Vermonters to eventually

get the bivalent booster, she said.

In June, the health department announced it would close most of its mass vaccination clinics and shut down its appointment portal, instead favoring walk-in clinics. The department's data shows that Vermonters are taking advantage of them: About 56% of bivalent vaccinations performed so far were at EMS-run clinics across the state.

"We basically just shifted the resources to be more flexible to meet the community needs," Ogleby said.

Starting last week, state-run clinics also offer the flu vaccine for people under 65 years old alongside Covid vaccinations. Ogleby said 650 people had gotten the flu vaccine at clinics so far, with another 25,000 people receiving the flu vaccine at other locations like pharmacies.

About 37% of bivalent Covid boosters were administered at pharmacies, with the rest performed at doctor's offices, hospitals and congregate facilities, department data shows.

Sosin pointed out that the state's reliance on pharmacies for vaccinations comes at a time of serious staffing shortages for many major chains. When she got vaccinated in the Northeast Kingdom in early September, she said, employees told her that the pharmacy had been closed for the previous nine days because of staffing issues.

"Layering vaccination on to a fragmented, private, commercial pharmacy system that's already functioning unevenly is really not a formula for success," she said. "We really do need state-run clinics to ensure that everyone has access to boosters right now."

## Loan forgiveness criteria changes

As of Sept. 29, some borrowers no longer match forgiveness criteria

By PETER D'AURIA, VTDigger

On Sept. 30, Hannah Regier called the Vermont Student Assistance Corporation, the state's nonprofit lender, seeking information about student loan relief. The Athens artist and town official has been slowly paying off student loans since finishing graduate school in California 15 years ago, but she still has roughly \$40,000 in student loan debt from the Vermont Student Assistance Corporation, or VSAC.

Under President Joe Biden's student loan relief plan, announced by the administration on Aug. 24, Regier believed that she was eligible for up to \$20,000 in loan forgiveness. But she was a day too late.

A VSAC counselor informed her that, the day prior, the Biden administration had quietly changed the criteria for loan relief — meaning that Regier's was apparently no longer eligible.

"It really sucks," Regier said in an interview. "I definitely used the F-word a couple of times with that poor counselor."

Regier is not alone. The changes in the loan forgiveness criteria — enacted discreetly late last month — meant that an estimated 800,000 borrowers across the country are now no longer eligible for loan relief.

That figure could include thousands of people who borrowed money in Vermont.

In late August, Biden announced that student borrowers could be eligible for up to either \$10,000 or \$20,000 in one-time student loan relief, depending on their eligibility for Pell Grants, which is federal aid geared toward low-income students.

That aid initially included borrowers who took out loans through the Federal Family Education Loan Program, often called FFEL loans. FFEL loans were guaranteed by the federal government but lent out by private lenders, including banks and nonprofit lenders like the Vermont Student Assistance Corporation.

FFEL loans were discontinued in 2010. But over 4 million borrowers still hold such loans, according to National Public Radio report.

That includes 10,741 people who, like Regier, borrowed through VSAC, according to Marilyn Cargill, the organization's vice president for financial aid services, marketing and research.

Those 10,741 people include former Vermont residents who left the state for college, as well as students who came from out of state to attend Vermont schools. Roughly 37% of those borrowers currently have Vermont addresses, Cargill said.

Those borrowers have a total of approximately \$250 million in FFEL loan debt, according to VSAC.

Prior to Sept. 29, the federal

government's student aid website told borrowers that they could become eligible for debt relief on their FFEL loans by "consolidating" them into a current federal loan program, the Direct Loan Program.

That process involves filling out an online form, according to Cargill, after which the federal Department of Education works to fold those loans into its own debt portfolio.

But on Sept. 29, the federal government changed its eligibility criteria. Borrowers with those FFEL loans "cannot obtain one-time debt relief by consolidating those loans into Direct Loans," the website now reads.

Federal officials told NPR that the change would affect roughly 800,000 borrowers. But it's unclear how many Vermonters that reversal will affect.

For one thing, high-income borrowers — those with a yearly income of \$125,000 or more per person, or \$250,000 for a household — are ineligible for debt relief.

What's more, many borrowers have both FFEL loans and publicly held Direct Loans.

So if a borrower has \$20,000 in federal Direct Loan debt in addition to FFEL debt, they could receive the maximum amount of relief without even touching their FFEL loans.

But since the change in the Biden (See Loans, Page 3A)

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