

# Newsletter



## Minimum Wage Will Increase to \$13.66 January 1st

Effective January 1, 2024, Vermont's minimum wage will see an increment to \$13.66 per hour, reflecting a \$0.48 raise compared to the existing rate of \$13.18. Simultaneously, the tipped wage will experience an increase from \$6.28 to \$6.84 per hour. These adjustments adhere to Vermont law, which mandates periodic annual wage revisions.

**SEND A PIECE OF VERMONT ANYWHERE**



**CHEESE & WINE TRADERS**

SHOP NOW

## Report Flood Damages to 211

We are now in the assessment phase of the December flooding. If your business or home has sustained damage, the Governor's Administration is asking that you fill out the forms on [Vermont211.org](http://Vermont211.org) in order to compile the amount of damage that Vermont has experienced. This information will help the state to qualify for federal assistance. 211 should only be used for reporting damage after you are safe. If you have an emergency, contact 911.

For those communities facing sustained road closures, you can find the more recent changes to conditions on [Vermont's 511 page here](#). Find power outages [here](#).

## Dates to Remember

July 1, 2024 - Employers should plan for a 0.45% payroll tax that will begin funding Vermont's Universal Childcare Fund

July 1, 2024 - Employers can begin to offer paid leave to employees through the Governor's Voluntary Paid Family and Medical Leave Program

## 2024 Session General Legislative Update Call

Beginning January 9, 2024 @ 11 every other Tuesday during the Legislative Session  
[Register in advance for this meeting](#)

## THANK YOU ANNUAL SPONSORS

### CHAMPION



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# Legislative and Regulatory

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## Visa-Mastercard Settlement Website Updated for Claim Forms Mailing

For nearly two decades there has been a class action lawsuit against Visa and Mastercard regarding merchant interchange fees. A settlement was filed on December 16, 2019. Last Friday, the official [Payment Card Interchange Fee Settlement website](#) was updated to provide information about claim forms. Because of the large number of claim forms being sent, you may not receive yours until late December 2023, or January 2024. Claims can be filed through the link on the official website by using the Claimant ID that will be provided in the mailed claim form. Find additional documents and frequently asked questions [here](#).

## Shippers Coalition Urges House Floor Votes on Committee-passed Trucking Legislation:

FMI joined other members of the [Shippers Coalition](#) in sending a [letter](#) to House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA) urging consideration of three trucking-related bills by the full House of Representatives: [H.R. 3372](#) to create a state opt-in, [up to](#) 10-year pilot program to evaluate an increased gross vehicle weight on federal interstates; [H.R. 2367](#) to authorize funding for the creation of thousands of new truck parking spaces; and [H.R. 3013](#) to modernize and streamline the commercial driver's license (CDL) process.

All three of these bipartisan measures passed out of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee in May. The coalition letter stresses that floor votes should be taken now, and consideration should not wait for a larger supply chain package to be developed on which to attach these measures.

In 2024, Vermont is expected to face financial challenges in addressing legislative demands, including flood recovery, property taxes, product bans, environmental regulations, and housing shortages. The business community can expect to see proposals to increase costs on employers. Beginning July 1, 2024 employers will be paying a 0.44% payroll tax for universal child care. However, we may see an attempt to pass legislation that will raise the other 0.55% that they wanted for the program bringing the total to 1%. We expect the legislature may also consider a mandatory paid leave program, which would also demand a payroll tax, instead of allowing businesses to enroll in the Governor's voluntary program? We expect to report on those proposals early in the session.

Review of S.18 the flavored tobacco ban will begin the second week of the session. Rep. Theresa Wood shared with VRGA President Erin Sigrist that the bill will pass out of committee with a narrowed scope, potentially including a ban on vape, or the potential to create a directory of legal products that can be sold in Vermont.

The House is poised to override the Governor's veto of H.158 the bill that would expand the scope of the bottle bill and create a Producer Responsibility Organization that would be responsible for streamlining the redemption system and increasing the rate of redemption in Vermont. The count in the Senate is a close call. There will be plenty of last-minute outreach to members as we talk with Senators into the session.



# Legislative and Regulatory Contd.

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There will be up to four different bills proposed to address the housing shortage. While S.100 (Act 47) was passed and signed by the Governor in 2023, more change is needed - specifically on Act 250. A new draft report by the Natural Resources Board recommends major changes to Act 250, exempting those areas with established strong local zoning while also ensuring protection to more sensitive areas.

In 2024, Vermont faces the impending implementation of the Vermont Global Warming Solutions Act (GWSA), which mandates a 26% reduction in emissions by 2025 and a 40% reduction by 2030. Since the law's enactment in 2020, measures have been taken to promote electric transportation and eliminate fossil fuel consumption.

Concerns arise about potential 2024 legislation introducing a credit system for gasoline distributors and further regulations reducing the sale of gasoline-powered cars, including the recent approval to decrease Class 4-8 truck sales in Vermont.

Labor issues, especially in an employee-centric market, remain a legislative priority. We expect the House General Committee to take action on the [Captive Audience bill](#), which aims to prohibit employers from disciplining employees for refusing mandatory meetings on religious or political matters. In today's climate, diversity, equity, and inclusion would be considered a political matter. The bill also would allow for employees to side-step the election process in creating a union and allows for the "card check" method.

We are still looking for a Vice President to join our team! Please [click here for the job description and requirements](#). Email [erin@vtrga.org](mailto:erin@vtrga.org) with inquires.



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Associated Grocers of New England



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Associated Grocers of New England is a full service Cooperative Grocery Wholesaler supplying Supermarkets and Convenience Stores from Maine to New York.

# Association News

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## Save the Dates! 2024 VRGA Events



**Legislative Day**  
*Capitol Plaza Montpelier*



**Scholarship Golf**  
*Location TBD*

### Sponsor VRGA!

We look forward to working with our Champions in the coming year to support our work in representing retail and the food industry in Vermont in 2024. Sponsors are essential to our work in supporting our members. Click [here](#) for more information on our available levels of sponsorship or reach out to [karin@vtrga.org](mailto:karin@vtrga.org).

### VSFA is Looking for an Executive Director

We are excited to announce that we have opened the search for VSFA's first fully dedicated Executive Director to support our members and grow the Vermont Specialty Food Association to its full potential.

With the help of the VRGA staff, the team that has been administering the association, the Executive Director will embark on transitioning VSFA to a stand alone organization that can promote the industry, expand the organization's reach and impact, and support members in a way that will bring expanded value. The position will be responsible for executing the vision of the board and membership, growing membership, increasing sponsorship, and working to support and promote the specialty food industry in Vermont and beyond. If you, or someone you know, are interested in the opportunity, please send a resume and cover letter to [erin@vtrga.org](mailto:erin@vtrga.org).

### 2024 Labor Law Posters

VRGA is gearing up to dispatch the 2024 labor law posters shortly. Members are encouraged to promptly [update their profiles](#) to ensure accurate mailing addresses, allowing VRGA to send the correct number of posters based on the number of stores associated with each member. Keeping profiles up-to-date is crucial for members to receive essential compliance materials effectively. If you have questions, please email us at [info@vtrga.org](mailto:info@vtrga.org).

### Reminder! Share the VRGA 2024 Scholarship Program with Employees

Annually, VRGA grants scholarships of \$1500 to 10 students attending a two or four-year college or university. VRGA members are encouraged to promote this opportunity among their employees. A [poster for display in stores can be accessed by clicking here](#). For detailed application requirements and the application form, please visit the provided link. The deadline for applications is April 26, 2024. For additional information, contact [info@vtrga.org](mailto:info@vtrga.org).

# Funding & Education

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## Up to \$500,000 in Rural Energy Grants for Small Businesses

USDA has funding for small business owners that are looking to make energy efficiency improvements and renewable energy investments to lower energy costs, generate new income, and strengthen the resiliency of their operations. To learn more and to get the application process started, contact Peter Cooke at the Ratio Institute.

The Inflation Reduction Act has increased the amount of funding available to businesses through the Rural Energy for America Program (REAP). These grants can cover up to 50% of the project costs (up to \$500,000), but there are steps and requirements that you must take prior to beginning your project.

We encourage you to reach out to Peter Cooke at the Ratio Institute, a non profit organization, to learn more. The application process requires an energy audit and several reporting requirements. VRGA has worked with the Ratio Institute in the past. They have the ability to conduct free energy audits for 10 Vermont businesses (\$600 value). The Ratio Institute will support you through the application process, and manage the reporting requirements.

## Grants for Woman Owned Businesses:

Find information on 31 different small-business grants specifically designed to support women entrepreneurs. The grants cover a diverse range of industries and are provided by various sources, including government agencies and private organizations. Read [here](#).

## \$1.25M Small Business Assistance Grants Available

Grant funding is now available for small businesses that are looking for technical assistance. The Small Business Technical Assistance Program links business owners to 300+ Vermont-based service providers. Apply for a grant to work with a professional that could support you in updating websites, financial forecasting, financial management, operations consulting, and more.

In its third round, the program prioritizes historically disadvantaged small businesses, allocating \$1.25 million to fund 183 awards with a focus on BIPOC, women, veterans, justice-involved individuals, people with disabilities, those in very rural areas, LGBTQIA+ individuals, Young Vermonters (25 and under), and Mature Vermonters (55 and older). For more information or to apply, visit [SBTAE Small Business Technical Assistance Exchange](#).

## Vermont Economic Conference

January 30, 2024 | [Register here](#)

The upcoming Vermont Economic Conference promises to be an insightful event, offering a comprehensive overview of the state's economic landscape. Anticipated topics include post-flooding recovery strategies, emphasizing community resilience and support. Business owners will likely receive guidance on their crucial role in cleanup efforts, with a call for volunteer participation in affected areas. Attendees can anticipate discussions on the importance of prompt reporting of damages through [vermont211.org](#) or by calling 211, contributing to data aggregation for potential federal assistance. Overall, the conference aims to showcase Vermont's community strength and collaborative spirit in navigating current economic challenges.



# WE'RE HIRING!

**Positions available  
in all departments  
and all stores**

An excellent place to become part of a team, whether focusing on a new career, or looking for some extra spending money. **Positions available in ALL stores** - no experience necessary! Ask about our Trainee Positions.

Stop by your local Hannaford or scan the QR code to apply online.



[hannaford.com/careers](https://hannaford.com/careers)

# Member Benefits

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## Get the most out of your membership

The Vermont Retail and Grocers Association has partnered with these organizations after careful consideration and review. VRGA believes these organizations can offer superior customer service along with considerable savings to member businesses. In addition to these benefits, we offer a comprehensive package of services. Learn more about our [services here](#).

### Payment Solutions

Wix, a premiere website platform and POS solution, allows you to sell online and in store. Create a beautiful website with easy templates. [Contact us](#) to schedule a demo and receive special VRGA member rates.



### Multi-state 401K Program

Provide great retirement plans to yourself and your staff, without the high cost, liability, and time drain of paperwork oversight. Member Chris Henry, President of The Medical Store, shares, "we ended up saving over \$12,000 annually" [Learn more](#).



### Payroll Services

A Vermont company offering easy and economical payroll services. Services include payroll checks, tax filings, reports, new hire reporting and more. Member discount & savings of up to \$150. [Learn more](#).



### Business Insurance Program

MMG Insurance offers a comprehensive and competitive insurance program designed for your business. Exclusive 5% discount for members.



### Vision Insurance

Low cost vision program with major benefits. Monthly premiums starting at \$5.95/mo.



### Dental Insurance

Access to a variety of affordable plan options with no minimum enrollments. Plans starting at \$41.75/mo.



For more information, please email [info@vtrga.org](mailto:info@vtrga.org).

Does your business produce food scraps? Since Vermont law requires everyone to keep food scraps out of the trash, many businesses hire a company to take their food scraps away, just like trash and recycling collection. [Find a food scrap hauler at VTrecycles.com.](#)

When getting quotes from food scrap haulers, ask what their service includes. Some haulers clean the totes and provide cover material, like wood shavings, for customers and others do not. Also ask if the hauler accepts anything in addition to food scraps, such as paper napkins or certified compostable plastic bags or containers—most do not.

Have questions or need help setting up your food scrap collection system? From managing odors to keeping bears away, your [local solid waste experts](#) and VT DEC can provide no-cost assistance. Find local resources at [802recycles.com](#) or call 802-828-1138.

### FMI Predicts Trends for 2024

FMI – The Food Industry Association reports that the grocery industry will continue to face challenges with labor shortages and the need for a resilient supply chain. Approximately 25% of shoppers have replaced restaurant meals with grocery store foodservice options, which is up 17% over last year, and in-store bakery departments will continue to remain popular for the value and convenience. With increased home cooking, private brands have gained popularity for being consistently good-tasting and cost-effective, prompting retailers to invest more in these brands as customers embrace them. Read more [here](#).

### KeHE Predicts Top Food and Beverage Trends for 2024: A Focus on Health, Sustainability, and Culinary Influences

KeHE Distributors has identified seven key food and beverage trends for 2024. These include a focus on health-conscious and clean-label products, a shift towards efficient cooking for "Redefined Convenience," an emphasis on sustainability in packaging, and the influence of social media on food choices. The trends also highlight consumers seeking functional foods for specific health benefits, an appreciation for quality ingredients, and a demand for nutrient-rich options. KeHE aims to guide retailers in aligning with these consumer preferences. Read the full article [here](#).



### Social Media Increases Your Customers

Like it or not, if your business isn't on social media, you're missing out on customers. Making sure you have ["stopping-and-engaging content"](#) that people can visually engage with at a higher rate will bring people to your website and your store at a higher rate. Take advantage of the SBTAE [Small Business Technical Assistance Exchange](#) to help you create a presence online or learn how to get noticed.

### Shipping Giants are Avoiding the Red Sea

Following attacks on commercial ships by Houthi militants off the coast of Yemen, two of the world's biggest shipping companies, Maersk and Hapag-Lloyd, said they have [paused](#) sending their ships through the Red Sea and will reroute around Africa. The Houthis, a militant group considered part of Iran's "Axis of Resistance" around Israel, which also includes Hamas and Lebanon-based Hezbollah, and their efforts to overtake cargo ships in the Red Sea could have a big economic impact. According to the International Chamber of Shipping trade group, 12% of global trade passes through the Red Sea.

### Self checkout is Here to Stay

Despite a love-hate relationship among customers, retailers are holding onto their [self-checkout lanes](#) - though many are tweaking the process.

### Black Friday Shopping Was Up This Year

New [internal data](#) from Bank of America shows that its customers' holiday spending in November was, [as predicted](#), more concentrated around Black Friday this year. The bank found that credit and debit card spending on holiday items in November was up 1% year over year. Customer spending was down YoY at the beginning of the month, but surged around Black Friday and Cyber Monday.

Based on Bank of America data for 2019 and 2022, 10% of all holiday spending usually takes place between Thanksgiving and Cyber Monday. That number was up 5% this year, with clothing and cosmetics, as well as air travel and event tickets, notably fueling the uptick. The increase happened despite the fact that many consumers started their holiday shopping as early as October.

### Holiday Shopping Surge

The CNBC/NRF Retail Monitor reports a strong start to the holiday shopping season in November. Total retail sales, excluding automobiles and gasoline, rose 0.77% month over month and 4.24% year over year. Core retail sales, excluding restaurants, autos, and gas, increased by 0.73% and 4.17%, respectively.

Key highlights include year-over-year growth in online sales (26.27%), health and personal care stores (9.15%), and sporting goods/hobby/music/book stores (8.25%). NRF predicts a 3-4% increase in holiday retail sales, reaching a record \$957.3 billion to \$966.6 billion. Read the full article [here](#).

# Member News | Classifieds

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## New Members this Month

Slice of Vermont  
Keith's Corner Inc.

Looking for  
something from a  
previous newsletter?

[CLICK HERE](#)

SEND A PIECE OF  
VERMONT ANYWHERE



CHEESE & WINE  
TRADERS  
[SHOP NOW](#)

## Fuel the Future: a student design competition

Global Partners is hosting the "Fuel the Future" design competition for undergraduate and graduate student teams across several Northeastern states. The challenge is to envision the fueling station of 2030, accommodating various renewable fuel types, electric vehicle charging, and hydrogen fueling. The design should prioritize a positive customer experience, potentially including amenities like convenience stores, exercise facilities, walking trails, dog parks, and relaxation areas. Students can register for the competition until January 31, 2024, with final submissions due by March 8, 2024. The top five finalists will have the opportunity to present their designs. See more information [here](#).

## City Market/COTS Tree Sale

City Market in Burlington held their annual tree sale in benefit of COTS to raise funds to end homelessness. They also round up at the register to support tree planting at the Intervale Center. The sale started on November 29 at the downtown and South End locations and was sold out by December 8!

## Washington Gets a Taste of Vermont

Vermont recently participated in the 16th annual Taste of Vermont event in Washington, D.C., featuring over 30 businesses from across the state. The event, initially suggested by former Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy, provides an opportunity for Vermont producers to showcase their locally-made products, ranging from cheese to chocolate, and engage with Congress to discuss issues affecting them. The event serves as a platform for promoting Vermont's diverse offerings and fostering connections between local businesses and policymakers. Read more [here](#).

## Association Staff is here to help!

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