

Newsletter



March brings Town Meeting Week Break for the Vermont Legislature along with crossover, (the deadline by which all priority bills must be passed out of the originating committee to be considered by the other chamber) and three busy weeks that are expected to be filled with discussions on new tax options in order to fill the \$230 million budget hole due to rising pressure on school budgets across the state.

The retail crime bill has passed the House Judiciary Committee and is headed to the full house for consideration. The bill, [H.534](#), if passed into law will aggregate the retail theft offenses within a 14-day period in one or more locations within a single county, and reinstate the Community Restitution Program ("work crew") to alleviate the court backlog and serve as an alternative to jail. The bill will be considered by the full House and head to the Senate where VRGA will be reaching out to members to testify in the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Save the Date! 2024 VRGA Events



Scholarship Golf

Williston Golf Club

[Register here](#)

A data privacy bill ([H.121](#)) that will require all retailers that collect data from customers to maintain a privacy policy that clearly states the specific purpose for which they collect and process personal data, specify what data businesses can and cannot collect, and impose major implications if a business fails to comply - including the increased potential for lawsuits. If passed, all retailers, distributors, food producers - every business - must comply. Currently, there are no exemptions.

Do you collect customer data? How do you manage that data? Let us know by emailing erin@vtrga.org. Any information shared will be confidential and shared only in the aggregate with no identifiable information.

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Legislative and Regulatory

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Labor bills have largely been quiet this session, but [S.102](#) remains one bill that VRGA is monitoring. Under this bill, employers would be banned from requiring employees participate in discussions surrounding religious or political matters. Given discussions today, meetings surrounding diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility may be considered political matters. The bill also alters current law in a way that organizers can side-step the voting process by allowing the “card check” method rather than an election to unionize workers. A similar bill that was passed in CT is currently being litigated. Business community organizations continue to monitor and keep in touch regarding the bill.

[S.18](#), the bill that would ban flavored e-vape and menthol tobacco products will be considered by the full House the second week of March after a flurry of amendments were introduced and slowed down movement of the bill. While the buzz in the hallways of the state house is that many democrats are opposed to the bill, leadership is working hard to garner enough votes to pass the bill and send it back to the Senate. If passed, the bill will need to be reconsidered by the Senate Health and Welfare Committee and then the full Senate. Governor Phil Scott has slightly altered his position on the bill, stating that with a major budget deficit, now is not the time to be cutting revenues and further impacting the affordability of the state.

The Senate Economic Development Committee will take up [S.175](#), a bill that would require retail businesses to accept cash. The committee reviewed similar language from Massachusetts,

2024 Session General Legislative Update Calls

Our next Legislative Update Call will be held March 19 @ 11 am
[Register in advance for this meeting](#)

Click [here](#) to view recordings of previous calls

Connecticut and Colorado prior to the break and a companion bill in the House was considered once and breezed over. The senate committee seems more interested in the issue. VRGA president Erin Sigrist will be testifying the second week of March. VRGA’s understanding is that very few retailers ban the use of cash. Let us know, do you accept cash? [Email \[erin@vtrga.org\]\(mailto:erin@vtrga.org\)](mailto:erin@vtrga.org)

LOOK WHAT’S IN STORE

The **Total Solar Eclipse** is coming to Vermont on April 8, 2024 and Moon Over VT has the made-to-order merchandise your customers want!



Association News

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Call For Board Members

VRGA is accepting nominations for new board members until April 19. If you're passionate about shaping the future of Vermont's retail and grocery industry, submit nominations to info@vtrga.org, including the nominee's name and a brief bio.

Share the VRGA 2024 Scholarship Program with Employees! Deadline Approaching...

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.

The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency's Office for Bombing Prevention (OBP) leads the Department of Homeland Security's efforts to enhance the nation's ability to prevent and mitigate the use of explosives against critical infrastructure and public and private sector entities. As part of this effort, OBP would like to make retailers aware that many off-the-shelf products can be used as bomb-making materials. These bomb-making materials can be purchased legally by customers and combined to cause explosive or fire-related incidents. Click on the QR code below for additional information



Karin Cioffi Named VSFA Executive Director

Karin Cioffi, former VRGA Director of Membership, has taken on the role of Executive Director at VSFA. Her transition signifies a move towards spearheading growth and collaboration within Vermont's specialty food sector. We express gratitude for her contributions to VRGA and wish her success in her new position. VSFA members will continue to maintain their membership with VRGA and enjoy access to legislative representation and access to VRGA benefits.

AG New England

This past year, we **recycled 2000 tons of cardboard** and **2480 lbs. of electronics** together with our customers.

Our **LED lights** in our distribution center have **saved over 25 million kwh.**

Why you ask?

Because serving our independent grocers is not the only thing important to us and our mission.

Associated Grocers of New England • 603-223-6710 • AGNE.com
11 Cooperative Way • Pembroke, NH 03275
Contact Eric Tinker, 603-223-5448 • etinker@agne.com
or Nathan Beit, 603-223-5436 • nbeit@agne.com

[f](#) Associated Grocers of New England [@AGNewEngland](#) [X](#) @AGNewEngland

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

Funding & Education

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33rd Annual Scholarship Golf Tournament



Registration for our 33rd Annual Scholarship Golf Tournament is now open! Click [here](#) to view registration form and sponsorship opportunities.

Grants Available for Energy Upgrades



If you're looking to upgrade your energy efficiency and lower your energy costs, there is up to \$500,000 available for your business through the USDA, see [here](#) for our webinar to learn more!

Three more businesses can benefit from the Ratio Institute's free energy assessment.

Vermont Seeks Waiver for Federal Summer EBT Program to Alleviate Summer Hunger

State officials in Vermont are seeking a waiver to participate in the federal "Summer EBT" program, which provides nutrition assistance benefits to low-income families during the summer. Vermont initially opted out of the program, citing concerns about administrative costs putting pressure on the state budget. However, officials are now exploring ways to secure a waiver that would allow them to participate without the labor-intensive data collection required by the formal rules. The program, officially launching in the summer of 2024, aims to combat summer hunger by providing \$40 per month in grocery-buying benefits per child to income-eligible families. The federal government would cover the \$3.6 million in benefits for Vermont families, but the state would be responsible for 50% of the administrative costs. Officials are navigating budget constraints and exploring options, including the use of existing data on eligible children and the possibility of securing a waiver to streamline reporting requirements. Administrative costs and the lack of a streamlined IT system are key considerations for Vermont's decision-making process. The state anticipates a more favorable situation in 2025 with the implementation of a new IT system.



Click [here](#) to learn more about accepting EBT in your store!

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.

Grocers Embrace In-Store Tech Revolution: Retail Media's Rise and Personalization Push in 2023–2024

In 2023, retail media became crucial for grocers, focusing on omnichannel and digital growth. Ad spending by food brands rose to \$717 million. By 2024, omnichannel retail advertising spending is expected to reach \$59.98 billion. Despite online growth, grocers plan to shift focus to in-store retail media tech in 2024 for a personalized shopping experience. Digital screens, interactive kiosks, and in-store apps are key. The goal is to eliminate the need for customers to clip coupons. Read the full article [here](#).



Grocery Prices Remain a Concern: Consumers Navigate Economic Uncertainty and Rising Costs

A year after the peak of the COVID-19 crisis, grocery prices continue to be a significant concern for consumers, even as the immediate impact of the pandemic fades. Factors such as high interest rates, rising debt, and increased costs for essentials like housing contribute to a feeling of financial pressure among consumers. Many are now more conscious of their spending, especially on necessities like groceries, as they navigate an uncertain economic landscape. While grocery inflation has decreased from over 11% to just above 1% in December, consumers remain skeptical and are slow to perceive improvements. Retailers are responding by emphasizing value through signage and personalized savings programs. Despite official statistics showing moderated price increases, consumers still feel the impact of inflation due to individual spending patterns not reflected in government metrics. The growing debt burden is further prompting shoppers to focus on prices and seek ways to manage their expenses. Read the full article [here](#).



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Industry News | Retail

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In 2024, the retail industry is prioritizing legislative initiatives to address key challenges. Efforts include combating organized retail crime, reducing credit card swipe fees with the proposed Credit Card Competition Act, and safeguarding pro-growth tax rates established by the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act. The industry remains vigilant regarding potential disruptions in the supply chain, particularly in response to recent incidents affecting commercial vessels in the Red Sea.

The 118th Congress, marked by a narrow division, presents a complex political landscape. Republicans hold a slim majority in the House, while Democrats control the Senate. This dynamic adds an extra layer of complexity to the industry's advocacy efforts. Beyond legislative concerns, retailers are actively contesting changes to the definition of a "joint employer" by the National Labor Relations Board, and they emphasize the importance of fostering a modern and flexible workforce. In the realm of immigration, the sector supports reforms to enhance the legal immigration system, seeking increased visas for guest workers, expedited work authorizations for legal asylum seekers, and permanent legal certainty for Dreamers. Overall, the retail industry is poised to navigate these challenges and actively contribute to shaping policies impacting its operations and workforce. Read more [here](#).

January Retail Sales Cool Amidst Economic Resilience, NRF Reports

The U.S. Census Bureau's recent data reveals a cooling in retail sales for January, with a 0.8% decrease compared to December. However, National Retail Federation Chief Economist Jack Kleinhenz notes that despite the slowdown, households remained active in spending.

Factors such as extreme weather, fluctuating prices for goods, and increased prices for services influenced the sales figures. Overall, January's retail sales were down month-over-month but up by 0.6% year over year, indicating ongoing economic stability. The NRF's core retail sales, excluding certain sectors, also showed a decline from December but demonstrated a 2.8% year-over-year increase, suggesting a resilient U.S. economy and labor market. The data aligns with the CNBC/NRF Retail Monitor, indicating that January sales were comparable to December levels. Read more [here](#).

2024 Economic Outlook: NRF Economist Highlights Labor Market and Fed's Balancing Act

National Retail Federation Chief Economist Jack Kleinhenz discusses the economic outlook for 2024, emphasizing the crucial role of the labor market and Federal Reserve decisions. Despite a robust 2023, Kleinhenz notes the Fed's challenge in balancing rates to sustain economic momentum without triggering inflation. While he predicts continued consumer spending growth, there's a potential labor market cool-down that could impact consumer decisions.

The Monthly Economic Review underscores the economy's resilience, citing Q4 GDP growth of 3.3%, a 2.5% annual increase, and positive indicators like rising disposable income and retail sales. Kleinhenz highlights the decline in the inflation measure, attributing part of it to increased productivity. However, he cautions about uncertainty in sustaining productivity growth. The key challenge remains striking the right balance between supporting the economy and managing inflation, requiring careful consideration of economic indicators, particularly job and wage growth. Read more [here](#).

Member News | Classifieds

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Looking for
something from a
previous newsletter?

[CLICK HERE](#)

Shaftsbury Country Store

The Shaftsbury Country Store & Cafe property in Vermont, which had been closed for about six years, has been revived under new owner Lilli West Williams. As the owner of Maple Leaf Realty, she initially listed the property but eventually decided to buy it herself. The building, with two three-bedroom apartments, reopened as a store with a coffee and sandwich shop. Williams has created a classic country store with a hot-plate special. With family connections to the property, Williams aims to fulfill a long-time dream of creating a welcoming community space. Read the full article [here](#).

New Members this Month

Lyndonville Redemption
Vermont Cheeseless
Myti
Thibault's Equipment Services
Choroksan
Lincoln General Store
Haute & Heady

DEC Hazardous Materials Program:

Businesses that generate hazardous waste—including grocery stores, general stores, gas stations, and other types of businesses—are required to manage their hazardous waste according to the Vermont Hazardous Waste Management Regulations (VHWMR). Small stores and other businesses that generate less than 220 pounds of hazardous waste per calendar month are referred to as “very small quantity generators” (VSQGs). The VHWMR also regulate “small quantity generators” and “large quantity generators” (SQGs and LQGs), and these businesses have more stringent standards to follow. Learn more about how to stay in compliance from the Vermont DEC Hazardous Materials Program:

- Resources for Hazardous Waste Handlers
- Fact Sheets
- Compliance Handbooks: one specifically for VSQGs and one for SQGs.

If you would like to receive the DEC Hazardous Materials Program’s newsletter (3-4 times per year), or if you have questions about whether your business is a hazardous waste generator or the VHWMR requirements, please contact Drew Youngs at Andrew.Youngs@vermont.gov or 802-461-5929.

Association Staff is here to help!

Erin Sigrist
President
erin@vtrga.org

Alyssa Greaney
Operations Coordinator
alyssa@vtrga.org

(802) 839-1928 | info@vtrga.org | www.vtrga.org

