

Full-time focus

Last year, the *Vermont Guardian* argued in favor of a full-time mental health commissioner to help bring some stability and focus to the task of replacing the Vermont State Hospital (VSH) and better integrating mental health care into the overall health care system.

However, we're no longer sure that putting a figurehead on top of a department is going to help bring to bear any greater understanding in the public, or better care in the system, or a deinstitutionalization of mental health care.

No commissioner could improve what is quickly becoming a burgeoning project in terms of scope and size beyond anything needed by such a small state to provide "treatment" for some those individuals labeled mentally ill. What started at \$10-20 million is now grown to more than \$100 million with little explanation.

At the same time, the census at VSH is more than at capacity, which means that the beds available at regional hospitals are either also full, or the hospitals are refusing to take people.

Those high numbers are due, in part, to the state's allowance of fewer psychiatric bed slots at Springfield Hospital, and the loss of beds at Rutland Regional Medical Center due to staffing shortages.

The recent suicide of a patient on the watch of Fletcher Allen Health Care, and its subsequent investigation, raises serious questions about the care that is being delivered to Vermonters. Investigators found at Fletcher Allen some of the same problems they found at VSH after two people there committed suicide — improper oversight and falsifying records to cover up the fact that care has not been delivered properly.

It's important to note that Fletcher Allen is the state's solution to the mental health system crisis — and wants it to host a new multi-bed psychiatric facility.

We are on the verge of a crisis in Vermont in terms of helping people who have been labeled mentally ill, and in many cases abandoned, or shunned, by society.

It's time for less talk about titles, and glossy blueprints, and more about ways to provide the right care at the right time, and put the patient, not policy, first.

Make it sexy, Speaker

House Speaker Gaye Symington told the *Guardian* recently that despite the claims of some Republicans, and a general sense among Vermonters, the Democratic-led Legislature is working on ways to tackle the rising cost of education, and its impact on Vermonters' wallets.

Though not grabbing headlines in the way that global warming, aid to farmers, or the withdrawal of troops from Iraq have, Symington said plenty of work is underway in the House Education and Ways and Means committees with an expectation that by Town Meeting Day an outline of how to move forward will be complete.

This template is part of the agreement between Symington, Sen. Peter Shumlin, the president pro tem of the senate, and Gov. Jim Douglas. The trio agreed to an outline of how education funding should be tackled this session and next.

"It isn't as sexy or exciting, but the work is getting done," said Symington.

While it's true that tax policy, in general, isn't "sexy," there is a need to get at the root cause of why education funding is rising, and why some in Vermont — despite property taxes being a lower share of their income than before Act 60 — are feeling a financial pinch.

Perhaps the statewide property tax is a bogus bogeyman, and it's a slide in personal income, or higher energy costs, or health care costs. Or, too many loopholes, as the *Guardian* reported last week, that allow companies with more than \$1 billion in taxable income in Vermont to walk away with only paying \$250, or some Vermonters to pocket an Act 60 rebate of \$25,000.

Working Vermonters are looking for leadership on an issue that is confronting many families in this state — the ability to get by and house and feed their families.

To them, while their hearts and minds may understand the impact of global warming on their future livelihoods, there are pressing concerns to them right now that can, and should, be dealt with.

Speaker Symington, Sen. Shumlin, and Gov. Douglas have the responsibility to make this issue not only "sexy," but downright lustful.



letters • • • • •

Fund renewable, public power for Vermont

In reading the article about the nuclear-powered green fund (*Vermont Guardian*, Feb. 9), it is obvious that Vermont continues to dissemble on the straightforward issue of funding and developing renewable energy projects in the state.

Right now, there is danger that the Legislature will decide to acquiesce to the renewables advocates for a mandatory renewable portfolio standard (RPS) for Vermont utilities. This is a complete exercise in painful futility for Vermont consumers.

Just ask Massachusetts. The penalty in the upcoming year for failing to meet that state's required RPS mandate is more than five cents per kilowatt hour. In other words, mandates do little to get projects built. Utilities in general really don't care if their consumers pay an extra five cents for power. This is not true for public power and cooperatives.

What works is a healthy combination of incentives coupled with both good policy and good intentions. Since the ratepayers will be paying for either the penalty or the power, why not put a half-cent surcharge on the bills of all Vermont consumers and use that

money to build real projects. This could either be added to or substitute for a part of the efficiency charge all ratepayers are already paying. These funds would be used to bring equity investment to renewable energy projects, and provide savings in the lower cost capital that would be available from public financing.

All of the available funds ought to go toward a publicly-controlled pool to develop renewable energy in Vermont for Vermont ratepayers. Yes, I am saying that today we need to take the long-term look at publicly-owned and publicly-financed renewable energy development in Vermont. There's nothing wrong with the profit motive on any of these projects. Of course, private companies would do the construction, and possibly contract for operation and maintenance of the plants. But the output from all Vermont projects would be available to Vermonters in the long term.

The Vermont Renewable Energy Authority. Let's get on with it.

Joe Bongiovanni
Harborton, VA

Joe Bongiovanni is the former general manager of both Washington Electric Co-op and the Hardwick Electric Department.

Sorrell: Do something about Vermont Yankee

Recently I wrote a letter to Attorney General William Sorrell asking him why Vermont has not joined the attorney general of Massachusetts in requiring a study of the possibility of a spent fuel pool fire as part of the relicensing of Vermont Yankee.

In 2005, the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) verified that a terrorist attack on a spent fuel pool was possible and that a fire resulting from such an attack would release large amounts of radioactivity. The NAS recommended that studies be done at each reactor to determine the vulnerabilities of each reactor and to evaluate what needed to be done to reduce the risk of such a fire. We need such studies done at Vermont Yankee because it is particularly vulnerable to such a fire since the spent fuel pool rests on a platform 70 feet up in the air.

Moreover, this is the perfect time to act. This June, the Ninth Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals in California ruled that that the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) must consider acts of terrorism in all licensing proceedings so there is now judicial precedent to act. One would think that the NRC, as the supposed advocate

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—John Harington (1561-1612)

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THIS MODERN WORLD

by TOM TOMORROW

THE GREAT RIGHT WING BRAIN GLITCH OF 2007

THEY BEGAN TO SPOUT UTTER GIBBERISH--BUT WE WERE ALREADY USED TO THAT... ELECTRICITY COMES OUT OF HOLES IN MY WALL! WHY DO SCIENTISTS HATE AMERICA?

FLYING MACHINES MADE OF METAL--IN WHOSE SKY?! ARE HOMOSEXUALS TO BLAME?!?

WHATEVER YOU SAY...

CONSERVATIVES HAD SPENT TOO MANY YEARS TRYING TO BELIEVE TOO MANY BLATANT FALSEHOODS.

THE WAR IN IRAQ IS AN OVERWHELMING SUCCESS!

THERE'S NO SCIENTIFIC CONSENSUS ON GLOBAL WARMING!

HOMOSEXUALITY CAN BE CURED!

DEMOCRATS WANT THE TERRORISTS TO WIN!

ET CETERA, ET CETERA, ET CETERA!

THE COGNITIVE DISSONANCE WAS ULTIMATELY MORE THAN THE HUMAN MIND COULD BEAR...AND ONE BY ONE, THEIR BRAINS BEGAN TO SIMPLY MALFUNCTION...

BZZRAAPPP! SPLUTTER!

DOES NOT COMPUTE!

EEP.

AND OF COURSE, PRESIDENTIAL INCOHERENCE NO LONGER SURPRISED ANYONE ... ZUCCHINI TRASHCAN MOUTHWASH! RADIO FREQUENCY! RADIO FREQUENCY!!

ANOTHER WACKY MALAPROPRISM FROM "THE DECIDER"!

HA, HA! NO ONE WILL EVER ACCUSE HIM OF BEING "ARTICULATE"!

WHICH IS WHY IT TOOK SO LONG FOR THE REST OF US TO NOTICE THAT ANYTHING WAS AMISS.

IRAN EVIL GO BOOM! BIG WAR! HA HA HA HA HA HA!

OH, HE'S JUST POSTURING! THERE'S NO WAY HE'S GOING TO ATTACK IRAN!

NO ONE COULD BE THAT CRAZY!

AT LEAST, NO ONE WITH A FUNCTIONING BRAIN!

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for the public's health and safety, would have immediately obeyed this ruling. Instead, the NRC is trying to find a legal way to avoid complying.

Gov. Jim Douglas' administration, by its actions, has made it clear that it is in favor of relicensing this reactor but a spent fuel pool fire would have catastrophic economic and health effects on our state. Prudence and common sense demand that Vermont should do all it can to ensure safety at this reactor.

If you agree with my concerns, please contact Attorney General Sorrell at 109 State St., Montpelier, VT 05601, or call him at 828-3171, or contact Gov. Douglas at 109 State St., Montpelier, VT 05601, or call his office at (800) 649-6825.

Time is of the essence — Vermont needs to act by March 19.

*Judy Davidson
East Dummerston*

Stop the assault on our wallets

Town meeting will come around in a few weeks, and I hope to remind the readers of some history. Every year, the property taxpayers are barraged with "special requests" for tax reductions or outright grants from the town treasury. Every one of these is

described as especially deserving and of such wide support that we should be ashamed to deny them. I want to relate part of a story from Col. David Crockett, from when he served in the U.S. House of Representatives.

One day in the House of Representatives, a bill was taken up appropriating money for the benefit of a widow of a distinguished naval officer. Several beautiful speeches had been made in its support. The question was about to be put to a vote when Crockett arose and spoke:

"Mr. Speaker: I have as much respect for the memory of the deceased, and as much sympathy for the sufferings of living, if suffering there be, as any man in this House, but we must not permit our respect for the dead or our sympathy for a part of the living to lead us into an act of injustice to the balance of the living. (...) We have the right, as individuals, to give away as much of our own money as we please in charity; but as members of Congress we have no right so to appropriate a dollar of the public money.

"Every man in this House knows it is not a debt [to the deceased]. We cannot, without the grossest corruption, appropriate this money as the payment of a debt. We have not the semblance of authority to appropriate it as a

charity. Mr. Speaker, I have said we have the right to give as much money of our own as we please. I am the poorest man on this floor. I cannot vote for this bill, but I will give one week's pay to the object, and if every member of Congress will do the same, it will amount to more than the bill asks."

He took his seat. Nobody replied. The bill was put upon its passage, and, instead of passing unanimously, as was generally supposed, and as, no doubt, it would have, but for that speech, it received but few votes, and, of course, was lost.

Rising property taxes affect us all in ways that are seldom measured. School expenses are out of control, and Act 68 has obviously not fixed the problem. Vermont schools are some of the most expensive in the country. I am sure that each district has some excellent teachers, but I cannot say we are getting our money's worth from the system. The only ones who do not complain about property taxes are renters. Don't they realize that a portion of the rent goes for the taxes? Rents are high because of taxes and a shortage of housing. That would be another subject.

I hope you will stand with me against this assault on our wallets. If we were not saddled with such a long list of taxes, it

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School increases: The real culprits

By William J. Mathis

"With small flags waving and tinny blasts on tiny trumpets, we shall meet the enemy, and not only may he be ours, he may be us." — Pogo

With tinny trumpet blasts emanating and echoing from Montpelier and Washington, our policymakers do not realize that they may be the bigger part of the problem. Ironically, they also have the keys to the solution. Yet, they continue to demonstrate about what is convenient rather than what is necessary.

Contrary to current political proposals, imperial decrees commanding school costs to stop rising have little effect upon these tides. We must look deeper.

Beginning with the federal government, the U.S. Department of Education's own inspector general says there are at least 588 state and local compliance requirements in the federal No Child Left Behind Act. Unnoticed in Vermont's cost debate is that federal education funds have been level or decreasing for the past three years. Using national added cost factors, these mandates are estimated to cost Vermont schools \$360 million in new, hidden, or displaced costs. To pay these costs, the feds give us \$61 million.

While the sensible decision would have been to turn down such a bad deal, our state policymakers accepted the law — and then complain about local schools' bad spending habits.

Subtly, these factors ooze into school cost increases. For example, the governor has said Vermont school staffing has increased 22 percent. The state Department of Education official records report a more modest 1.8 percent increase between 2003 and 2006. Digging a little further, teacher and aide numbers have gone up less than one-half of one percent. However, data processing staff has increased 126 percent, and business office clerks have shot up by 33 percent. What do these new people do? They fill out state and federal forms, count beans, and comply with mandates.

In 2006, the Vermont Department of Education sent 410 memos, 166 "advisories" as to how programs should be run, and issued 92 separate requirements or orders compelling local review and action. Twenty-four more mandates spewed forth that re-

quired actions of some group.

Certainly, state mandates regarding bullying, hazing, harassment, action plans, school quality surveys, air quality, emergency drills, testing, etc. have laudable purposes. While schools are stretched to meet these requirements, they are buried beneath an avalanche of paper — and at the same time our state policymakers say that local districts are spending too much money.

The governor, for example, calls for caps on school spending increases that would step down to 3.5 percent per year. Some legislators, apparently unaware of the natural variation in costs, have proposed that citizens in towns that spend 15 percent above the average should pay a tax penalty.

Sadly, this kind of thinking punishes the victim. Neither the federal nor state government has distinguished itself on health care reform (although Vermont has taken some steps).

During the last 10 years, health



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costs alone added an average of 1.8 percent per year to school budgets. Likewise, federal and state special education mandates increased the budget an average of 1.2 points annually. New technology needs, mandates, and paper pushing add another point. If we give teachers and staff a 3 percent cost of living increase, that adds another 1.8 percent per year. That's 5.8 percent per year.

The governor's proposed cap of 3.5 percent is busted by outside budget pressures alone.

Yet, the state could do something about the real problems. They could push aggressively for relief from pass-through federal mandates or for adequate federal funding. They could say "no" to programs that cost more than we get. They could remedy school and business health care costs. They could eliminate mandates in their own laws and regulations. They could relieve dubious process and reporting requirements.

Caught in the convenient, they don't do the necessary.

Certainly, school spending has increased faster than inflation. But only a part is within the control of local schools. Most notably, we hear about small class sizes. However, these are often requested by parents, and are shown to improve academic and social outcomes.

Fundamentally, school costs can only be addressed by resolving the real drivers of these costs. At the same time, policymakers must recognize that blaming the victim leaves only barren ground.

If we merely wave small flags and blow tinny trumpets while proclaiming solutions that don't solve, we will have met the real problem — and it will not be the schools. ☹

William J. Mathis is the superintendent of the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union.