

Towns talk up impeachment, taxes



Vermonters brave chill, heat up town meetings

By Shay Totten & Christian Avard
Vermont Guardian

If there's a message from this year's town meeting, it's this: Vermonters are upset with Pres. George W. Bush, and less so with school budgets.

Voters in three dozen Vermont towns want Congress to begin an impeachment probe of Pres. George W. Bush and Vice Pres. Dick Cheney. Two towns, Clarendon and Dover, voted the measure down. Nearly a half dozen towns agreed to not take up, or tabled, the resolution.

Only a handful of towns voted down their school budgets, while a wide margin of towns approved them. However, many observers advise caution about reading too much into the passage of school budgets as a sign that Vermonters are happy with the current education funding system, or with rising school budgets.

There are 251 towns in Vermont, but not all hold town meetings in March, and some aren't large enough even to hold one. Some others vote only at the booths.

Roughly 20 towns passed measures calling for the immediate withdrawal of troops from Iraq, and to care for them when they were back on U.S. soil. Dover also rejected the troop measure.

About two dozen towns had one of the items warned on their town meeting ballot, while many others took up the issue during "other business" at the end of the meeting.

The votes come after a whirlwind, four-day tour of Vermont with antiwar icon Cindy Sheehan and three Vermont Iraq War veterans, along with organizers of the resolutions. Sheehan testified before a state Senate committee on March 2, along with war supporters.

"I'm happy with it. I think we've got a very

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Property tax: Reform or repeal?

By Shay Totten
Vermont Guardian

MONTPELIER — Lawmakers used their Town Meeting Day break to tell voters what they've been doing in Montpelier since January, and, in turn, expected to hear what voters want them to be doing.

Property tax reform and curbing the steep rises in education spending will be two such topics.

Days before the break, Republican Gov. Jim Douglas chided lawmakers coming up with few ideas that he believes will curb education spending

and lower property taxes.

In a quick response, leaders of two key House committees issued a report to the full Legislature outlining what they have reviewed in the past two months, and what changes are to be proposed once lawmakers return from their break.

The four-page report issued March 2 by Rep. Janet Ancel, D-Calais, chairwoman of the House Education Committee, and Rep. Michael Obuchowski, D-Rockingham, chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, keyed in on 11 major areas ripe for reform — from spending controls to

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Penguin Plunge sets records

BURLINGTON — The 12th annual Penguin Plunge in Burlington raised more money and saw more people plunge into the icy waters of Lake Champlain than ever before.

On Feb. 10, 947 plungers raised \$318,000 for Special Olympics of Vermont, which provides year-round sports training and athletic competition in a variety of Olympic-type sports for children and adults with intellectual disabilities.

The following groups and individuals were recognized for their outstanding fundraising efforts:

- The Peerless Penguin (highest fundraiser) — Marc Lewis, part of Team Just Do It, from Shelburne, raised \$11,308.

- The Pack of Plungers Prize (largest group-not a school) — Burlington Rugby Football Club;

- The Peerless Flock (largest group from a school/college) — Chittenden East;

- Penguin Patrol Award (largest group from law enforcement agency) — Vermont Police Association;

- Plumage Award (most creatively dressed) — Lenny Silvia from Burlington, as Hulk Hogan.

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school governance — in Vermont's \$1.2 billion education system.

In some areas, the committees are prepared to introduce legislation, while in others, more work remains.

For example, the Ways and Means Committee plans to recommend capping at \$6,000 the amount a single taxpayer can receive in property tax rebates — down from a current \$10,000 — but will continue to examine whether additional tax breaks can be given to farmers.

The House Education Committee, meanwhile, will propose that the Education Commissioner be required to examine high-spending special education school districts — those who spend more than 20 percent above the statewide average. Ancel said lowering costs in these districts could save \$5 to

\$6 million annually. However, it sidestepped the issue of restructuring school governance.

The committees will hold a joint hearing from 2:30-4:30 p.m. Wednesday in Room 11 of the Statehouse to hear from lawmakers, and then hold a public hearing that same evening from 6 to 8:30 p.m. in the House chambers.

On March 1, Gov. Douglas announced that he would hold a half dozen "accountability forums" in the coming weeks so Vermonters can offer ideas on how to lower education spending, and make Vermont a "more affordable place to live."

The first of these forums was held March 7 in Lyndonville. Others will be scheduled in the coming weeks.

"I have become increasingly concerned that this general assembly does not appreciate

the affordability agenda or the people who support it," Douglas said. "In two months there has been no progress on reducing the oppressive burden of the property tax."

In response, top Democrats countered that the governor is mischaracterizing the work of these two key committees.

"If there were an easy way to do this, or a simple way to control the growth in spending, someone would have done it before," said Ancel. "We're working with a very large, complicated system."

Earlier this session, Douglas, along with House Speaker Gaye Symington, D-Jericho, and Senate Pres. Pro Tem Peter Shumlin, D-Windsor, agreed to a framework of how to tackle education spending and ease the property tax burden.

In their letter, Ancel and Obuchowski said the goals of this framework were to:

- Support the excellence Vermonters expect of their schools;
- Maintain Vermont's commitment to equity in public school financing;
- Examine what Vermonters expect of their schools and how to more effectively deliver those education services;
- Lower the rate of growth in public school spending, making it more affordable for taxpayers; and,
- Finance schools in a way that makes more transparent budgetary decisions on property taxes, and collect those taxes more efficiently.

Douglas said he saw the agreement as a pact to not criticize individual proposals, not to agree on a two-year approach. He added that the options he has been shown by legislative leaders are laudable, but he doesn't believe they will do enough to provide tax relief. He again said he believes a property tax cap, and other changes he has proposed, would provide immediate savings of \$30 million or more per year.

"Frankly, nothing that I've seen will do anything to reduce Vermonters' property taxes this year or next year," said Douglas.

While Douglas may be concerned, Ancel noted, she has not seen members of his administration in her committee room much, if at all, this year.

Other than Secretary of Administration Mike Smith and Tax Commissioner Tom Pelham, both of whom spent one hour with the committee to tes-

tify, no one has been present in the room.

"In fact, the only way we got the governor's proposal at all was because I wrote a letter" to them, said Ancel. "Other than [Smith and Pelham], the administration has not stepped foot in our committee room."

By comparison, Ancel noted, when she served on the House Health Care Committee last session there was someone from the administration in the room nearly at all times, even if it was only to take notes.

In their letter, Ancel and Obuchowski said the committees had three concerns with Douglas' spending cap proposal, which would have capped spending growth by 4 percent in the first year and 3.5 percent in each of the following four years.

Those concerns were:

- The proposal would hit the lowest spending schools the hardest;
- Districts that tuition all, or most, of their students, have little control over the tuition they are charged and cannot affect spending growth; and,
- Special education costs can dramatically fluctuate in one year, especially in small schools, and his proposal did not address that.

Ancel added that the Joint Fiscal Office estimated that Douglas' proposal would save only \$14 million, not \$30 million. That figure, she said, came from increasing the income sensitivity in law from 1.8 percent of income to 2 percent.

"It was really a cost shift," said Ancel.

Rather than Douglas' proposal, the committees recommend modifying the current high-spending threshold in law. Under current law, when a school district spends more than 25 percent above the statewide average, the district is required to pay a higher rate for the spending above the threshold. The committees believe the threshold should be lowered to 15 or 20 percent above the average.

"This threshold does seem to work as there are only eight school districts in that zone and we have heard testimony that school boards and voters pay attention to that threshold, so we're recommending that we move it down," said Ancel.

The committees are also going to further study the overall cost drivers of education spending — personnel, student-teacher ratios, and classroom size. The study would focus on the

overall efficiency and effectiveness of the education system. The committees will continue to determine the impact of state and federal mandates, as well as special education expenses, on local school budgets.

School budget defeats are being measured by some as a barometer of whether people are dissatisfied with the current education funding system.

Steve Jeffrey, the executive director of the Vermont League of Cities and Towns, was not expecting widespread defeats of school budgets, and said there were no major issues facing towns this year.


"I'm interested to see what happens with school funding, but so far it doesn't seem like a lot of budgets are going down to defeat," said Jeffrey early on Town Meeting Day. "If everyone is complaining about the property tax and budgets are being passed I don't know what that means."


One observer isn't sure that budget defeats told the whole story last week, when lawmakers were home on break.

"It's not just about today, but all week. This is a pretty important week in terms of engaging people about what's happening in the Legislature — people talking with their legislators so they know what they are thinking," said John Nelson, executive director of the Vermont School Boards Association.

Rep. Rick Hube, R-Londonderry, and a founder of Revolt & Repeal, a statewide movement aimed at repealing the current education funding system, said he believed lawmakers heard plenty from voters about changes needed this year to help stave off rising property taxes.

While many Vermonters only pay a portion of their income toward property taxes, many also own camps, second homes, and business properties — or more than two-acre homesteads — all of which are exempt from income sensitivity. Those individuals do not get a reduction on property taxes.


"We're always looking for a silver bullet or a magic potion, but I don't think there is one," said Hube. "But, I don't think we have a good handle on what are driving up our school costs. We are told that everything under the sun is driving up costs, but we haven't really quantified those numbers. I think it's time that we do that, and determine where we can find some savings." 



A series of lectures presented by the INSTITUTE FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

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Mr. Rachlin, senior director of Downs Rachlin Martin PLLC and Distinguished Lecturer in Law at Vermont Law School will discuss the limits of law in the context of national emergencies and "states of exception." He will also discuss the legal status of Guantánamo detainees, two of whom he represents.



All events are from 6:30–8 P.M. at Burlington College and are free.

The Lysistrata Project
by Kathryn Blume
March 21

Women & the Art of War
by Cathleen Wilson
March 28

A Citizen's Army
by Michael Dubie
April 11

The War Against Women
by Ann Shepardson
April 18

War & Democracy
by Frank Bryan, Ph.D.
April 25

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good number of towns that have reported so far and are passing it,” said Jimmy Leas, a South Burlington lawyer who crafted the troop withdrawal resolution.

Newfane Selectman Dan DeWalt is the major organizer of the impeachment resolutions. His effort has drawn global media attention and scorn. Last year, six towns passed impeachment resolutions.

This year, the impeachment resolutions have passed so far in Bristol, Burke, Calais, Craftsbury, Dummerston, East Montpelier, Greensboro, Guilford, Grafton, Hartland, Jamaica, Jericho, Johnson, Marlboro, Middlebury, Montgomery, Morristown, Newbury, Newfane, Peru, Plainfield, Putney, Richmond, Rochester, Roxbury, St. Johnsbury, Springfield, Stannard, Sunderland, Townshend, Tunbridge, Vershire, Warren, Westminster, Wilmington, and Woodbury according to organizers. Organizers based their information on reports from people in each town.

DeWalt said organizers will use these votes to urge state lawmakers to take up a measure in the House calling for Bush’s impeachment. The bill is currently in the House Judiciary Committee.

“This is clearly not a cry of protest, but the start of action — an impeachment insurrection that will lead to the reclamation of our Constitution,” said DeWalt. “Vermonters are angry and energized. We are taking the power that is sovereign in us and will use it to restore the Constitution. We will show the world that America has not sunk to the depths of violent madness that is the Bush administration.”

House Speaker Gaye Symington, D-Jericho, has been lukewarm to the idea of moving an impeachment resolution to the House floor.

“The Legislature has a very short amount of time to do its work and needs to focus its work on the issues most affecting Vermonters — property taxes, health care, and our energy future,” Symington told the *Guardian* earlier this year. “We have a very limited amount of time dealing with national issues. The Iraq War has a direct impact on Vermonters in terms of the lives lost and the budget pressure that gets pushed onto the property taxes when we’re cutting Medicare, Medicaid, and special education reimbursements.”



Despite the subzero temperatures, Newfane voters got a taste of barbecue at their town meeting. photo by Christian Avard

And, she added, leaders in Congress have already said they are focusing their energy on other pressing matters.

“I think we should be focusing this energy on the next election cycle,” Symington said.

Several towns voted to not take up the measure: Bakersfield, Londonderry, Dorset, Stamford, and Walden.

Additionally, 20 towns approved a measure calling for troops to be withdrawn from Iraq: Bristol, Calais, Cornwall, Greensboro, Guilford, Hardwick, Jamaica, Jericho, Johnson, Marshfield, Middlebury, Newfane, Peru, Plymouth, Rockingham, Roxbury, St. Johnsbury, Townshend, Waldon, and Woodbury.

According to a *Guardian* reader, in Pomfret the impeachment resolution was moved under “other business,” but a voter countered with an amendment not to vote on the resolution because many of the town’s residents had already left the meeting. Voters agreed and voted to table the resolution 43 to 28. In this context, the troop resolution was not moved. Supporters of the measure, however, will raise the issue again.

In Middlebury, where Gov. Jim Douglas, a Republican, is the town moderator, voters approved both the impeachment and troop withdrawal measures. Douglas, ironically, was the chairman of Bush’s 2000 election committee and 2004 reelection committee in Vermont.

Ellen McKay, a backer of the impeachment measure, said some members of the Middlebury Selectboard and Douglas tried to limit debate to one minute per person. Douglas also questioned whether something that was not warned should war-

rant a vote.

“But, there were a lot of people in Middlebury who understood what other business was going to mean and this is a huge issue for our community,” said McKay, who says the Iraq War, proportionally, has cost Middlebury \$8 million to fund the war.

In Dover, the impeachment topic sparked a heated debate.

“I do not want my senators or representatives for the next two years trying to bring down this president. I want them to focus on bringing the best possible outcome to the chaos that is now in Iraq,” said Laura Sabilia, a school board member and sister of four brothers currently in the armed forces. Sabilia trembled as she spoke, and at times had tears running down her face. “I do not believe that demanding that our troops come home now will help and I will not debate this with anyone.”

A supporter countered that the impeachment resolution wasn’t about the war, but the Constitution.

“We have to stand up and respect the Constitution that our [founding fathers] stand for. Our troops will not come home during their time in office, and as far as impeachment goes, it only means they are investigated and whatever happens of it will happen,” said Sue Rand. “It’s not about removing Bush and Cheney but investigating.”

Gloria Levine, the person who brought up the resolutions up at town meeting, was dumfounded by the rejection.

“I’m not disappointed, I’m just absolutely dumbfounded at how the things said today came in light of the facts that nine more military personnel were killed in Iraq,” said Levine.

In Jericho, home of Syming-



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ton, who is not supportive of the impeachment measure, voters approved the impeachment resolution 88-67, as well as the troop withdrawal measure.

Leas, and other backers, hope the impeachment and troop withdrawal measures will help to focus Vermont's congressional delegation on ending the war, and investigating Bush and Cheney for what they believe were deliberate lies to get the nation into the war.

"This war is going to continue for another year or two years if this funding request is approved, and we don't have confidence that [Congress] will vote to end the war," said Leas. "It's time for the people to get involved and the people have to push what may not be on their agenda — that's our leadership."

The Vermont Legislature recently approved measures in both the House and Senate calling for an immediate and orderly

withdrawal of troops from Iraq.

In Stamford, voters tabled both articles. Helen Fields, a co-organizer of the Stamford effort to get the resolutions on the warning, was disappointed, but hopes to bring the issue up again in the near future.

"We have parents in our town with [sons in Baghdad] that are at risk, so our town has a lot of people that very much want this war to be over and don't quite understand why their children's

lives are at stake," said Fields. "It's hard for me to say that this vote was a vote for or against the articles. I think this vote was for or against discussion on a very debatable topic. People have very strong feelings whether or not the president should be impeached and we have very strong feelings about pulling out of a war that many soldiers and soldiers' families have made the ultimate sacrifices for."

Keeping town meeting alive

While many lawmakers, and other interested parties, are paying close attention to whether school budgets are passed, others are watching whether communities choose what is known as Australian balloting over traditional floor discussion and votes.

Susan Clark, co-author of *All Those in Favor* — an overview of town meeting in Vermont — along with Frank Bryan, said several towns took up the issue of ballots versus floor votes this year.

Tinmouth, which voted in November by one vote to move to secret balloting, took up the issue again at their annual meeting and voters opted to end the practice of voting budgets from the floor.

However, in Shoreham, voters rejected a move to vote their town budget in secret by a 86-6 tally and also agreed to vote next year's school budget from the floor, 24-15. Shoreham had been voting on its school budgets via secret ballots for more than 20 years.

Rep. Will Stevens, I-Shoreham, the town's moderator, said the discussion was lively during the town meeting, and one woman carried that over into the school meeting. "She basically didn't think it was fair that the town votes on one budget one way, and then the school budget another," he said.

"The message to me as moderator was that people want the discussion and access to the information when they vote, and possibly get to amend items," said Stevens. "This will mean my job will be more challenging next year, but it may also be more rewarding."

Clark, who is a strong advocate for floor votes, said the Shoreham vote may be unique.

"That might be a first," said Clark, who lives in Middlesex and was looking forward to a heated debate on the issue in her town meeting.

The issue has been such a hot topic that both sides have been mailing information directly to voters and even putting up lawn signs.

In the end, however, Middlesex voters overwhelmingly rejected a proposal to move away from a floor vote and discussion to all-day, secret balloting.

Odds & ends


Both Burlington and Lincoln voters were asked to call on Congress to empanel a new investigation of the 9/11 attacks. The measure passed in Lincoln by a 38-17 tally.

Burlington voters rejected, by a two to one margin, a similar measure. Of those voting, 64 percent said no, and 36 percent said yes.

"I think the numbers show that this is not a fringe issue, and that a growing number of people want to see a true investigation of what happened on 9/11," said Doug Dunbebin of Vermonters for a Real 9/11 Investigation.

He said the group would still work to lobby Vermont's congressional delegation to call for an investigation of 9/11.

Also in Burlington, Hillary Weeks became the first member of the Green Party elected to office in Vermont. Weeks, an organic farmer, ran unopposed for a three-year term as an inspector of elections in the city's Ward 3.

She is also the first female Green Party member elected to office in Vermont. 



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