

The glass gavel?

Much ado has been made recently that House Speaker Gaye Symington isn't acting like "one of the boys" in her role and is focusing too much on getting policies approved rather than seeking approval from media pundits and political insiders.

More than two decades after Vermont's first, and only, female governor, the state's media can't seem to get away from her hairdo, what she wears, what her husband does, and how she doesn't play politics like her predecessors.

You would think that in Vermont, this so-called bastion of progressivism and political correctness, that we could come up with some other gauge to determine how well an elected official is doing.

Symington should be commended on her leadership style — Vermonters are getting tired of the slick politicking and word play practiced by Senate Pres. Pro Tem Peter Shumlin, a Democrat, and Republican Gov. Jim Douglas, to name just two. Is it interesting political theater? Yes.

Symington's mettle showed through during the recent impeachment debate in the House. What former House Speaker would have had the cojones, to bend a metaphor, to face her critics in the well of the House head on? The answer: None of them. They would have, instead, done what Shumlin did — craft a deal late at night and get a measure voted on with no debate, few spectators, and several key members of the chamber absent.

It was an unprecedented reminder of who controls the agenda in the House — Vermonters. Not one person. As Symington likes to note, she wields a gavel, not a crown.

This session will be defined by what the Legislature didn't do, rather than what it did. Thanks to a solid economy and healthy tax receipts — something politicians have almost nothing to do with — elected officials will be able to walk away saying they were able to provide additional property tax relief.

Symington, if she is to be effective in the long run, will be judged on what policies are put in place as a result of her consensus-building approach. As Speaker she has helped to build a solid majority in the House for her party, but that party — along with its independent and Progressive allies — has failed to deliver on key reforms around funding education and health care.

We believe Symington's consensus-building approach to policy and politics represents the best of Vermont — regardless of whether you support the content of the policy. She is allowing debate from all sides.

The danger with this approach, however, is that any given policy has no natural supporters because everyone puts in what they like, not what is uncomfortable politically.

We certainly don't want to see Vermont turn into Washington, but the danger of failure is that more heavy-handed pols will set their sights on the podium.

Delivering the message to DC

Vermont's rag-tag group of citizens who have successfully been able to get the Vermont Senate to approve a call on Congress to begin impeachment proceedings should be proud of their diligence, persistence, and downright politeness.

Despite impeachment being a divisive, and often distracting, issue, the effort's most ardent supporters were able to gather nearly 400 people in Montpelier in an effort to urge lawmakers in the House to vote out a resolution. It failed, but the pressure they placed on members in the Senate prevailed.

Now, with their sights on Washington and Vermont's sole congressman, Rep. Peter Welch, D-VT, impeachment backers hope they can convince him that signing onto an impeachment resolution is the right thing to do. They hope to gather hundreds of people this coming weekend at Hartford High School for an impeachment hearing with Welch presiding.

It's highly unlikely that Welch will change his mind on this issue. He is adamant that an impeachment debate will solidify Pres. George W. Bush's support in the GOP at a time when many are beginning to question the Iraq War policy.

Still, perhaps Welch can deliver a message to his fellow Democrats, and the country, that at least some Vermonters would like to see Bush held more than accountable. They'd like to see him on trial and removed from office.

Maybe then someone will heed the call.



letters • • • • •

Make housing affordable

Open space environmentalists and smart growth proponents are advocating housing affordability schemes to prevent sprawl and encourage urban livability.

Policymakers are considering tax subsidies or reducing property taxes to make homes affordable while more and more land is kept green. Yet housing still remains unaffordable (*Vermont Guardian*, April 16).

Government-subsidized units or those mandated to be affordable only affect a few households in this state. Taxpayers pick up the tab in the form of increased taxes and/or higher housing prices to subsidize these buildings. Nothing is free. This is a hidden redistribution of income that affects housing affordability in Vermont.

If we really want to address housing affordability we need to tackle impediments such as urban growth regulations, lengthy planning processes, complicated design codes, restrictive zoning, historical preservation, land conservation easements, wetland mitigation, and open space preservation programs that all drive up the cost of land and housing.

Regulations and permit requirements have contributed to

the 250 percent increase in land costs since 1996. State and local officials take heed — your actions make housing unaffordable.

If you're interested in reducing housing costs, start with zoning reform, not housing mandates and subsidies. This is the only way to keep the dream accessible to every Vermont family.

Frank Mazur
South Burlington

An answer to Vermont's energy future

A lot of people in Vermont don't want nuclear power — even if it doesn't emit carbon dioxide and it provides our cheapest reliable electricity — and want Vermont Yankee (VY) closed in 2012 (*Vermont Guardian*, May 3).

But if we successfully close VY, both carbon dioxide emissions and electric rates will go up. It is being proposed that industrial windfarms can fill the gap created when the VY contract, which provides a third of our electricity, ends in 2012. Although industrial windfarms have a place in our energy future, wind can never provide for that gap because it doesn't always blow. Instead, Vermont would have to build more natural

gas generating units to back up the wind, causing more carbon dioxide to be emitted in Vermont. That seems to conflict with the Legislature's attempt to deal with global warming, the Legislature's interest in protecting Vermont ratepayers, and existing statutes that protect Vermont high-elevation ecosystems.

But there is an answer for Vermont's energy future, with or without nuclear energy, and it would help keep Vermont the number one least polluting state in the country and the sixth most desirable tourist location in the world. The answer is hydropower.

Hydro Quebec has 35,000 megawatts (MW) of hydropower. We need only 1,000 MW in Vermont, a drop in a mighty big bucket. It doesn't emit carbon dioxide, it is renewable (as all hydro is regardless of the size), and it is reliable 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Industrial wind will not make Vermont energy independent, nor will it keep the money earned by out-of-state developers and their investors in the state. If Renewable Energy Credits are sold out of state, as is proposed, windfarms in Vermont could actually help carbon dioxide emitting facilities in Massachusetts and Connecticut

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continue to pollute.

Industrial wind can be a valuable resource when sited correctly. But it has caused controversy in many of the proposed locations in Vermont because developers do not share the same concerns and dedication to stewardship of the land that many Vermonters do. If we are serious about combating global warming, we need to focus on the causes of carbon dioxide emissions, our heating and transportation, not on an electric system that is already cleaner than anywhere else in the country.

We in the Northeast are fortunate to be able to use water as an electric generating source. Compromising our protected areas above 2,500 feet for any form of development could be a slippery slope, and a lot of mud can be washed down our mountains if Vermont doesn't get this right.

Hydro Quebec, along with sound efficiency and conservation practices, offers us, right now, our best option for our future electric needs. It would also provide Vermont the time to explore community-based power solutions that are decided by and for Vermonters. And that public discussion, where everyone is invested in the outcome, could be a fertile ground for the discovery of new and better ways to power our electric needs, reduce our heating with new efficiencies, and conserve our energy and natural resources.

Sandy Wilbur
South Londonderry

Support energy efficiency

Recently, while the governor and lawmakers were debating whether to make tiny investments to reduce Vermont's dependence on foreign oil, Pulitzer Prize-winning author and scientist Jared Diamond was at Middlebury College to warn that our society is close to collapse.

Diamond's talk broadly followed the contours of his 550-page book, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. Diamond concludes that there are five reasons societies fail or succeed: human environmental impacts, climate change, hostile neighbors, friendly trading partners, and how the society responds to these other challenges.

While it may seem dramatic to consider the collapse of our society, Diamond noted that many societies have declined rapidly after reaching their peak — much to

the shock of their citizens.

The Energy Affordability and Climate Change bill in the Legislature creates an all-fuels efficiency utility that would help Vermont residents and businesses save money on their heating bills, as Efficiency Vermont has saved millions for Vermonters on their electric bills.

The efficiency utility benefits us all five ways Diamond identified: It reduces our vulnerability to oil depletion; it reduces greenhouse emissions; it reduces our dependence on oil from regions hostile to the United States; it provides a model that, like Efficiency Vermont, can be exported to our friendly trading partners and help them; and, it sets up better incentives for making economically and environmentally rational decisions.

Ask the governor and the Legislature to give the efficiency utility the funding it needs.

Carl Etnier
Montpelier

The reasons Vermont is unaffordable

I just finished reading the article on affordability in Vermont (*Vermont Guardian*, April 26). I live and work in northern Vermont and my job regularly takes me across all of the northern counties. I must disagree with Wallace Roberts on several points.

First, you almost never see a modest-sized home being built on a normal town-sized lot any more. Most are huge homes built on multi-acre lots. At the current price of land, that is a big portion of the price of home. These houses are being built because someone is buying them — people with a lot more money than your average Vermonter are coming here from areas where housing is a lot worse.

Second, on the matter of taxes. The population density in Vermont is low. Therefore, everything in government and school is going to cost each of us more, especially since we seem to want to keep up with the Joneses. There are a lot of people who rent here in Vermont. They do not see how property taxes affect their rents. There are a lot of older people in Vermont also who are not hammered by property taxes the way working property owners are. End result: You have a huge percentage of people who don't have a reason to get out and vote down school and town budgets.

Thirdly, I want to bring up employment. Vermont has made

it so tough to do business here that few employers want to come here. They are regulated out of this state to friendlier places. Act 250 I hear is a nightmare. The environmentalists have such sway here that getting anything of any size approved here is a crap shoot. Wal-Mart in St. Albans and the Circumferential Highway down south are prime examples.

This is made even worse by the fact that the transportation system is awful. We have two major north-south arteries and no east-west arteries. Nearly all other roads in this state are poorly maintained, narrow two-lane paved country roads or dirt roads. This makes getting raw materials in and finished products out tough. The most prosperous areas in the state are next to a freeway. The rest of the state goes begging.

While external pressures are in fact working against us, there is much that could be done that would ease the affordability problem. But it will take getting Vermont legislators' heads out of the clouds and back on their shoulders and paying attention to what really is going on in our own backyards.

Mark Pynduss
Alburgh

Nuclear is not an option

I was shocked to read the article about nuclear possibilities (*Vermont Guardian*, May 3). There was not one mention of the radioactive waste sitting around Vermont Yankee or the fact that nuclear is not carbon emission free because of the commissioning and decommissioning processes and mostly in the process of enriching uranium to use in nuclear power plants.

The *Guardian* also did not mention that Vermont Yankee is an old plant that has been vibrating for years, cracking various parts of the plant and no one has figured out why. I believe all the other plants of this type have been decommissioned.

Also the *Guardian* states that it is only people in close proximity who are concerned about Vermont Yankee. That is patently false. There are many of us in all parts of the state who learned from Chernobyl that one does not have to be near a plant to be devastated from an accident.

Brennan Michaels
Salisbury

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—John Harington (1561-1612)

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