

Vermont Environmental Report

Public Interest Groups To Press For New Gains In 1978 General Assembly

The 1978 Session of the General Assembly opens on Wednesday, January 4, and environmental groups are readying themselves for what many observers see as a tough session.

What distinguishes the 1978 session from others in recent years is the existence of a sizeable General and Highway Fund budget surplus, estimated by Bruce Mosher of the Joint Fiscal Committee as of June 30, 1977, to be in the neighborhood of \$21 million.

The \$21 million surplus combined with the fact that legislators will be facing the voters in November, 1978, suggests that this could be a lively, hard-fought session.

In what follows, the VER talked to representatives of the major environmental groups who will have an active lobbying presence at the State House. These representatives discussed their legislative objectives and revealed their sense of the major issues that would come before the 1978 session.

(1) Vermont Natural Resources Council, (Seward Weber)

VNRC's Executive Director, Seward Weber, will be the Council's lobbyist at the State House in the 1978 session.

High on Weber's list of legislative priorities will be the task of defending Act 250 from legislation that would weaken the Act. At the same time, proposed developments like Pyramid Mall, have demonstrated the need for putting forward legislative measures that would strengthen Act 250. VNRC is interested in the idea of strengthening the role of regional plans and regional planning commissions in reviewing large developments like Pyramid Mall.

VNRC has a list of other legislative concerns.

Weber said, "I wouldn't call the Fragile Areas Bill a big issue, but I would like to see it pass the Senate in this session." The Council will also be working with the Fair Tax and Equal Education Coalition in pushing for property tax reform and a new approach to state aid to education. Weber was unwilling to make predictions about the session, but he did feel that the Act 250 issue will be one of the major questions before the Legislature, and it will be a number one priority for VNRC.

(2) Fair Tax & Equal Education Coalition (Benjamin Huffman)

Public Affairs Consultant Ben Huffman will be working for the Fair Tax & Equal Education Coalition as he did in the 1977 session.

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"We are going to try to get H.361 passed," says Huffman about his legislative objectives. He thinks there is a good chance for this in the 1978 session.

At the heart of H.361 is a provision that would value farm and timber land at its "use value" instead of its "fair market" value. A companion bill is being developed by the House Education Committee to alter the state aid to education formula. This new formula would measure the "wealth" of a given town by the income of its residents and the taxable value of "non-homestead" property.

Huffman praises the hard work of House Education Committee members who have been developing a new state aid formula throughout the summer and fall. He sees a lot of haggling over the present surplus, who gets it, and he says the chances of adopting a new state aid formula are about 50-50 at the moment.

(3) Lake Champlain Committee (Anne Riegelmann)

The Lake Champlain Committee took an active role in the initial formulation of Act 250. The Committee is interested in issues of planned growth, land use development and water quality, and will be providing active support on Act 250 issues as they develop in the 1978 session.

(4) Vermont Public Interest Research Group (Leigh Seddon)

VPIRG Assistant Director, Leigh Seddon, outlined a long list of VPIRG legislative concerns in the 1978 Session.

At the head of the list is VPIRG's desire to see amendments to Vermont's Container Deposit Law.

"I consider (these amendments) a major priority in the 1978 session," said Seddon, "because our bottle law has not been working properly."

"It's a question of \$1.5 million," Seddon add-

ed. He was referring to an estimated \$1.5 million that Vermonters could save at the marketplace in reduced costs of beer and other beverages if the brewers who now use throwaway containers were forced to switch to refillables.

The future of Act 250, the State's major land use and development planning law, will be another high-priority VPIRG legislative concern. Seddon went as far as saying that he felt the environmental focus of the 1978 session would be the State's role in planning for its future. VPIRG will oppose amendments that would weaken Act 250. At the same time VPIRG will be supporting legislative proposals to strengthen Act 250 in the wake of the Pyramid Mall development.

VPIRG estimates that the effects of road salting, particularly its resultant corrosive damage to motor vehicles, costs Vermonters over \$50 million a year. VPIRG wants a bill to reduce the use of salt on Vermont's roads.

VPIRG will be working on a wide variety of energy-related measures. Some of these are energy conservation bills such as a sliding registration fee for motor vehicles based on vehicle weight, tax incentives and low-interest loans for alternative sources of energy, and a measure to exclude energy conservation improvements from property assessments.

In other energy matters, VPIRG is asking the Legislature to consider a bill to put aside sufficient money for the decommissioning of nuclear power plants after their working life is spent. And VPIRG wants the Legislature to require Vermont utility companies to allocate low-cost "Power Authority of New York" (PASNY) power to residential customers as their first 300 kilowatts of electrical energy.

(5) Vermont Tomorrow, (Stuart Meacham)

"We will definitely have a lobbying presence on the Hill and it will be a full-time commitment," says newly-appointed Vermont Tomorrow Director, Stuart Meacham.

Meacham believes that citizens should take a more decisive role in the legislative process.