

Vermont Environmental Report

STATE ENERGY OFFICE:

One Year Later: What Does It Look Like?

the attack

"What about the performance of the Vermont State Energy Office over the past year? What about the effectiveness of Vermont's energy chief, Brendan J. Whittaker?"

These are questions that have been raised in recent weeks in the wake of speculation that Brendan Whittaker may be the most likely candidate to succeed Martin Johnson as Secretary of the Agency of Environmental Conservation.

Putting the case against Whittaker, the Energy Office, and, by extension, the Administration of Governor Richard Snelling, are energy specialist Charles Sheketoff and student intern John Jagelsky of the Vermont Public Interest Research Group (VPIRG), Representative William Field, a Democrat from Chelsea, and two private entrepreneurs who are promoting alternative energy.

Charles Sheketoff was responsible for VPIRG's lobbying effort on energy matters in the 1978 General Assembly. He had the opportunity to gain a first-hand impression of the performance of the State Energy Office at the Legislature. And he didn't like what he saw.

According to Sheketoff, State Energy Office representatives at the Legislature were slow off the mark, lackluster in their support of key energy bills, and at times, simply out of touch with what was happening. "If they put in a lot of staff time with the Legislature," says Sheketoff, "they wasted a lot of time."

These are specific points the Sheketoff makes against the performance of the State Energy Office during the last Session.

- On H.666 and H.405, the "gas guzzler bills" that would have taxed cars on a sliding scale based on their energy efficiency, Sheketoff says, "The Energy Office appeared only once before the House Transportation Committee." But they didn't push hard for this legislation. They simply let these bills die in Committee.

This is despite the fact that a "gas guzzler bill" was on the list of the Governor's priorities for the Session.

- About Bren Whittaker's response to a bill that would have reorganized the Vermont Public Service Board (PSB), Sheketoff says, "Whittaker fought the PSB reorganization bill." Here, as in other cases, Sheketoff says, "The Energy Office was reacting to legislation instead of proposing its own program."

- After the Legislature passed H.555, a bill to provide tax credits to Vermonters who invest in renewable energy devices, the Energy Office thought that H.555 would take effect on July 1, 1978. In fact, the tax credit program was to take effect on "Sun Day" May 3. It seemed incredible to Sheketoff that the Energy Office should be so badly misinformed about legislation within its own area of presumed competence.

- When an amendment that would have provided an alternative energy tax credit for 'electric storage heat' was offered to H.555 (a notion that Sheketoff characterizes as "absurd") the State Energy Office was slow off the mark. "Everyone knew this amendment was being introduced," says Sheketoff. Everyone except the State Energy Office. "They were simply left behind."

These lapses, some of them admittedly nit-picking, are to VPIRG's Chuck Sheketoff symptomatic of the failure of the Energy Office to provide spirited leadership. Sheketoff finds this mediocrity somewhat incongruous. A year ago when Governor Snelling appointed Bren Whittaker as Director of the Energy Office, Snelling promised a reorganized Office with a new, more activist mission.

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