

REASON AND FAIR PLAY VICTIMS IN SENATE VOTE

January 19 was a day VNRC staffers will not soon forget. Barely two weeks into a legislative session expected to concentrate almost exclusively on property tax and health care reform, the focus switched abruptly to environmental issues when the Vermont Senate unexpectedly rejected reappointment of three members of the state Environmental Board.

Republicans, the majority party in the Senate, defeated Gov. Howard Dean's renomination of board Chairwoman Elizabeth Courtney and board members Terry Ehrich and Ferdinand Bongartz. Although the nominations of two other incumbent board members were approved, Senate Republicans said they had rejected Courtney, Ehrich, and Bongartz—a third of the Environmental Board—to express discontent with the Act 250 process, which they claimed subverted economic development in Vermont.

VNRC Executive Director Jane Difley and Deputy Director for Policy Stephen Holmes defended the board, meeting quickly with Dean to urge him to stand by his nominees.

"The board has been fair and impartial when its record of decisions is reviewed," Holmes said. "The Senate placed itself in the awkward position of second-guessing the board's decisions without looking at the facts."

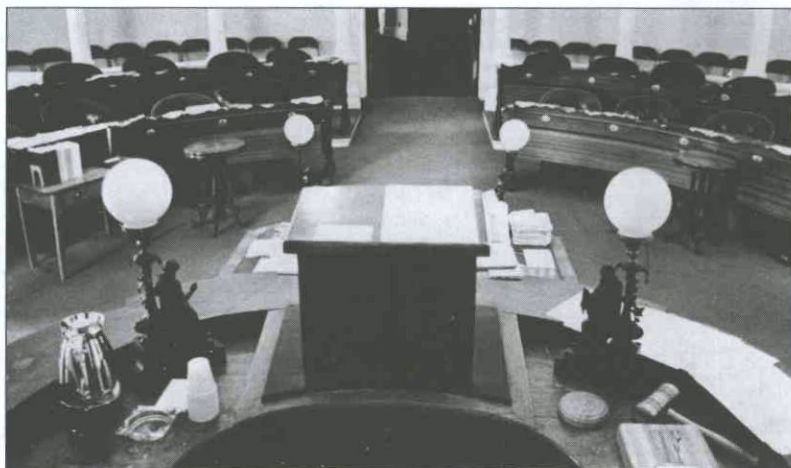
Of 30 board decisions in 1993, 18 were appeals of decisions made by district environmental commis-

sions, and the remaining 12 were declaratory rulings requested of the board. Appeals had resulted in permit denials by the board only twice. Furthermore, all the appeal decisions were made unanimously by the nine-member board, meaning the records of board members rejected by the Senate did not differ materially from those of the two

who were approved.

"This is a volunteer board," VNRC said in a letter to all senators, Gov. Dean, and Lt. Gov. Barbara Snelling. "Subjecting these individuals to a tortuous confirmation process hurt the Vermont tradition of citizen volunteer service to the state."

Continued page 2



A view of the Senate chamber as seen from the presiding officer's podium.

DIFLEY: HOW PIECES FIT IS KEY TO CONSERVATION

Jane Difley, VNRC's new Executive Director, communicates a vision of the way things fit together. It includes the natural elements of air, water, soil, and trees, the environment she has worked in during her career as a forester. It includes, equally, the power of people working together to conserve the natural environment.

The science of conservation is complex, says Difley, who assumed her new position Jan. 18, and so are the politics of leading people with diverse viewpoints and interests to a common ethic of safeguarding and preserving the environment. But through advocacy and education, Difley believes, Ver-

Continued page 2



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SENATE, cont'd from page 1

Rather than castigating board members, VNRC proposed that the Legislature focus on permit reform efforts already underway. But the events of Jan. 19 underscored VNRC's opposition to sweeping changes that could reduce citizen input.

Testifying before the House Natural Resources and Energy Committee on the day of the Senate vote,

DIFLEY, cont'd from page 1

monsters are up to it.

"In forestry school I learned that everything is connected to everything else," she says. "How the trees grow is related to the soil, and to past land use; it's related to other plants that grow in the soil and to the availability of water. And the forest helps clean the water. Air pollution impacts trees and trees help clean up air pollution.

"It's a complex matrix of relationships.

"With VNRC it's the same kind of thing," Difley concludes. "VNRC's programs—forestry, water, and land use planning—are all related. Both in terms of conservation and policy, they fit together in particular ways in Vermont."

Jane Difley, 44, is a native New Englander (from Barre, Mass.) and a resident of Bennington. Though previously a forester in Vermont, she comes to VNRC from Washington, D.C., where she was vice president for forestry programs with the American Forest Foundation, serving as national director for the 74,000-member Tree Farm System. In January 1993, she

Holmes discarded his prepared notes and said, "In light of the events of today, it makes it all the more important to resist these kinds of global changes."

Holmes urged the committee to look carefully at what caused such problems as unwarranted delays and costs for development proposals—primarily Agency of Natural Resources permits—and limit reform to fixing those aspects

of the permit process.

"The committee seemed to be saying, 'Let's take the engine apart, throw some parts out, and put the thing back together,'" Holmes said later. "We say, 'Let's just tune it up.' And we also urge that any changes strengthen the role of citizens, putting the power outside the realm where politics can play such a destructive role as it did January 19 in the Vermont Senate."



VNRC Executive
Director Jane Difley

was elected the first woman president of the Society of American Foresters.

In Vermont, Difley served on VNRC's board of directors from 1990 to 1993, including a stint on the executive committee.

With a change of leadership some changes might come to VNRC, but the new Executive Director says she is uncertain what they will be. "(Former Executive Director) Ned Farquhar is brilliant and dedicated; I can't say enough good things about Ned," she says. "But I'm a different person and the organization will be different with me there.

One way might be that I have a stronger orientation toward education."

She says she has regretted seeing VNRC's staff grow smaller during the belt-tightening 1990s.

"The staff is hard-working and bright, people who care not only about Vermont's environment but about Vermont's people. Channeling that energy and dedication is one of the most important jobs an Executive Director has. It's not always easy to figure out the best thing to do. Environmental issues—like environmental science—are complex, the way they impact people and the economy and the environment. Putting those things together is just not as simple as it used to be."

And so Difley will ask VNRC's membership to participate.

"It's important that the members not only pay their dues, but that they be involved, connected to the education and advocacy parts of VNRC, and help by educating other citizens. The more involved the members are, the stronger VNRC will be, in all ways."