

Campaign Roundup:

Gay Candidates and VCU Endorsements

One has it easy, and one is running hard, according to interviews with gay representatives Bill Lippert (D.-Hinesburg) and Robert Dostis (D.-Waterbury). Lippert, the long-time legislative veteran, has been in the legislature for nine years and is running unopposed. Dostis was first elected in the civil union/Act 60 backlash election of 2000.

"I'm exhausted," admitted Dostis in a phone interview. "I'm in a two-member district and there's only one Republican running, but he's working hard."

Asked what he's been hearing on the campaign trail from constituents, Dostis replied, "Mostly I hear that they're pleased with my work. I haven't pissed anyone off. So I'm cautiously optimistic. As a freshman legislator, I still have to work hard for votes, and that means going out every day, knocking on doors."

One issue he hears about is affordable health care. "I've got folks whose kids are in the Dr. Dynasaur program, but the parents have no coverage," said Dostis. Taxes are another perennial concern. "People are very upset with how high their

taxes are going. We have to reduce our reliance on the property tax to fund education. The block grant is going up 3 percent a year, but budgets are going up 6 percent a year, and that throws the added expense back onto the local property tax."

He hears almost nothing about civil union, but thinks Republicans are "working hard to elect opponents. It's their secret agenda."

If the election for the governor and/or lieutenant governor ends up in the legislature, the vote, said Dostis, should be open. "I don't believe in the secret ballot" on this issue, he said. "It could be challenging for me to decide which way to vote. I'll probably look at who gets the most votes statewide and at how my district votes. Likely my district will go for Racine, and that won't be a challenge for me. But if the district went overwhelmingly against, that would make it very difficult. I'm likely to vote with my constituents."

And, he said, "The thing is, that we have got to get our community out there, engaged and voting. We cannot take this lightly. [Democrats] must retain the Senate if we're going to hold onto civil unions."

Lippert is relatively relaxed, thanks to not having opposition for his seat representing most of Hinesburg. "I am pleased to have that be the case," he said. "I think it's a measure of the support I enjoy and my success in the legislature. Four years ago against a strong opponent I won with 60 percent of the vote. Last election in the backlash, that total dropped by only one point."

He is focusing his attention elsewhere, helping the party and working to support other Democratic candidates. "But it's been very low-key," he said of his own campaigning. For the final weeks of the campaign he planned to register voters and talk to people. "I'm surprised at how low-key the race is at the gubernatorial level. I think the intensity of the politics of two years ago is still having an impact."

Asked whether he thinks there will be a low voter turnout, Lippert said, "It makes me nervous. I'm just hoping that our community will understand that this election is so important. Out-of-staters don't understand the significance of this election because there's no visible civil union opposition."

"I think there's a strategic decision to keep it quiet, though I have no hard evidence to support that. The Republicans have learned that right wing rhetoric will cost them the Governor's office," Lippert said. "We need to show up, vote, be very active at the polls." And, he concluded, we need to "have one-on-one conversations with our friends and neighbors, because they may tip the balance. Who is in the Governor's seat is going to be hugely important for our community and the state as a whole."

VCU Endorses Candidates

In other political news, Vermonters for Civil Unions (VCU) issued a list of endorsements that at the top of the ticket held no surprises and encompassed the entire Democratic slate: Doug Racine for Governor, Peter Shumlin for Lieutenant Governor, Jeb Spaulding for Treasurer, Deb Markowitz for Secretary of State, and Elizabeth Ready for State Auditor.

In the legislative races, VCU offered no endorsements in a number of races, and at least one sur-

prise: for Lamoille County's single Senate seat, it endorsed both Susan Bartlett, the Democratic incumbent, and Cathy Voyer, the Republican former Representative. According to notes provided on the VCU Election Report web page, the Voyer endorsement reflects Voyer's participation in crafting and supporting the original civil union bill, despite her vote for H.404, a bill to define marriage in Vermont as between a man and a woman. "We remain extremely disappointed by then-Representative Voyer's vote on this anti-gay bill," concludes the note.

VCU used four criteria to decide on its endorsements, including "loyalty," "electability," "strength of conviction," and how "the candidate compare[s] to other contenders running for the same seat." "Loyalty" was determined by the candidate's votes on the civil union bill, and on two other House bills meant to weaken the provision. Details of "strength of conviction" and the candidate comparison criteria were not offered. ▼

Civil Unions Low Profile Issue in 2002 Campaigns

BY PAUL OLSEN & EUAN BEAR

In statewide and local campaigns throughout Vermont this year, civil unions seem to have taken on the role of the proverbial elephant in the room. Everyone knows it is there but none of the statewide candidates is willing to talk about it.

Two years ago, civil unions played a key role in Vermont's election campaigns. A number of antigay groups, including Take Back Vermont, Take it to the People (TIP), and Standing Together and Reclaiming the State (STARS), were formed to elect candidates pledged to overturning the landmark law. Campaigning with an anti-civil union agenda, Republicans won control of the House of Representatives while Democrats maintained control of the state Senate, and Vermont Gov. Howard Dean (D), a civil union supporter, narrowly won reelection.

On the surface, civil unions seem to be playing a smaller role in 2002. The TIP web site was updated only in mid-October and the STARS web site is defunct. While the state Democratic Party platform says, "We continue to support Vermont's Civil Unions law," the Republican Party's platform avoids calls for outright repeal: "A primary responsibility of government is to support traditional institutions, such as family, which are its foundations."

Candidates for office also suggest that civil unions have a much lower profile. "Civil

unions is certainly a quieter issue this year than it was in the last election," said Anthony Pollina, the Progressive Party's nominee for Lieutenant Governor. "It does come up, but it is fair to say it doesn't come up as often. Two years ago civil union was used quite effectively as a wedge issue." Pollina, a civil union supporter, ran for Governor in 2000.

Republican gubernatorial candidate Jim Douglas also says civil unions are not a big issue for the average Vermont voter. "Interestingly, very few people ask me about civil unions on the campaign trail," he said in an interview. "I don't think it is prominent on people's minds right now."

The GOP's candidate for Lt. Governor, Brian Dubie, echoed Douglas's comments. "I have been asked the [civil union] question once in a public forum," he said on Vermont Public Radio's Switchboard program. "It hasn't come up."

Democratic gubernatorial candidate Doug Racine's recent fundraising letter to civil union supporters likewise did not directly address civil unions or diversity education in schools, but referred to Vermont "traditions of human rights" and "access to safe and affirming schools." Racine wrote that the campaign will decide "if we are taken back into a divisive struggle."

Pollina attributes the lack of interest in civil unions to the fact that fears raised during the civil union debate in 2000 did not materialize. "The average folks who may have been opposed [to civil unions] have begun to see that

it hasn't really changed their lives, and it hasn't really changed the state," he said. "I do think that people are focused on the economy."

But are civil unions really off the political radar screen in Vermont this year? Civil union supporters don't think so.

"Even though the law we passed has survived the hateful attacks by the Take-Backers, we're not out of the woods yet," Vermonters for Civil Unions statewide coordinator Henrietta Jordan recently wrote in an email sent to civil union supporters. "The press may believe that civil unions is not at issue in this year's election, but don't doubt for a minute that anti-civil union legislators will try again as they see they have a majority in both the House and Senate. In fact, this election may be more dangerous than the 2000 one, precisely because there are so many new candidates, and many of them are not saying how they'd vote on civil unions."

Pollina agrees with Jordan's assessment. "I do believe that there is still a hard core of anti-civil union, almost anti-civil rights, folks who organize below the radar screen and will work hard for those candidates who oppose civil unions particularly in the rural parts of the state."

Legislative strategists have suggested that there's no chance the Democrats — viewed as the pro-civil union party, although there have been defectors on important votes, and some Republicans have supported the civil union law — can take back the House of Representatives from the Republicans. They are focusing their

major effort on maintaining control of the Senate.

Email sent to energize supporters of Vermonters for Civil Union from the organization's founders quoted "Take Back Vermont" founder Tom Wilson's rallying cry: "The opportunity this election year presents cannot be over-estimated. Vermont is Ground Zero in the culture war. The whole country watches. If the pro-family movement can take the Vermont Senate ... we send a profound message of hope to the world: America lives, truth prevails, and grassroots truth-tellers can turn the tide."

The pro-civil union political action committee also quoted a fundraising mailing from the Rutland-based "Center for American Cultural Renewal," asserting, "We can finish the housecleaning we started two years ago; the Senate, the Executive, the Judiciary — all need sweeping out. ... We are thrilled with the chances to take back the Vermont Senate this year!"

The email went on to suggest that an anti-civil union House and Senate might pass a new version of last year's bill to "repeal and replace" civil unions, along with Rep. Nancy Sheltra's "perennial proposals to censor our local schools to prevent education promoting tolerance, including tolerance of sexual minorities."

Further complicating the picture is the increasingly likely possibility that the three-way races for Governor and Lt. Governor might be decided by the newly seated legislature. ▼