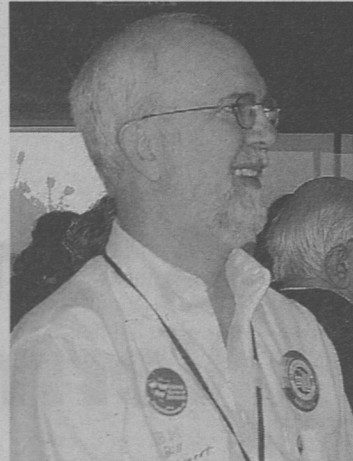


BY EUAN BEAR

Montpelier – There's one thing the four openly gay members of Vermont's House of Representatives have come to consensus on: there will be no gay caucus.

Bill Lippert (D-Hinesburg), the newly appointed chair of the House Judiciary Committee was joined in 2002 by Robert Dostis (D-Waterbury). In 2004, two more openly gay Democrats were elected to the House: Steve Howard, a returning House veteran from Rutland, and



Three of four openly gay members of Vermont's House of Representatives: Jason Lorber, Robert Dostis and Bill Lippert

in his first chairmanship, both wind energy and Vermont Yankee. The nuclear power plant has become a legislative issue because of a single word in the statute requiring the legislature to approve onsite storage of spent fuel rods other than in pools, such as in what is called "dry cask storage." The pending "uprate," or increase in output, and extension of the plant's operating license would require dry cask storage sooner than otherwise planned.

"I want to hear from some experts," Dostis said, pointing out that Vermont Yankee supplies a third of Vermont's power at very low cost. "Where would the replacement

Five Gay Legislators, No Gay Caucus

Jason Lorber, a newcomer to Vermont residing in Burlington.

The fifth gay legislator is Ed Flanagan, the first openly gay Vermont state Senator. Senator Flanagan did not return phone calls in time for this report.

In phone interviews, all four Representatives conveyed a version of the same explanation: there is no need/plan for a gay caucus, or it's not a priority; I would be less effective/lose my effectiveness if we were to separate ourselves off.

Lorber: "If we want to be effective, we need to bring in our heterosexual allies. If we want to get bills passed, that's what we need to do."

Howard: "I don't think so. I will operate as any other legislator would by participating in our county and party caucuses. I don't see any need."

Dostis: "There are no plans for a gay caucus. Our strength is in not separating ourselves out or segmenting into smaller caucuses. It's not helpful. I plan to work with everybody on the same level."

Lippert: "I'm not sure it's a priority, but I've agreed to stay in conversation."

Three of the four men have leadership posts on House committees. In addition to Lippert's Judiciary chairmanship, Dostis was appointed to the chair of Natural Resources and Energy, and Howard is the vice-chair of Transportation.

Lorber was "honored to be unanimously elected clerk" of the Institutions committee.

Perhaps the most influential will be Lippert, who has served the longest among the group. Lippert was the vice-chair of Judiciary in 2000, when the civil

unions compromise was crafted to fit the requirements of the Vermont Supreme Court's *Baker v. State* ruling. In the four years the Republicans ran the House, Lippert stayed on Judiciary but was not given a leadership position.

"It is satisfying to me in many ways to bring to full circle my participation on Judiciary," he said.

Gender Identity Bill

His committee will likely have the most to say about whether a gender identity and expression nondiscrimination bill passes the House. But at press time Lippert had not yet decided whether he would introduce the

Vermont has no single nondiscrimination law, but rather a series of laws in different sections of its statutes covering housing, credit, employment, healthcare, and public accommodation.

"The bill will be introduced," Lippert assured *OITM*. "It's just a matter of whether it makes the most sense [politically] for me to be the lead sponsor." He suggested that several allies to the LGBT community on his committee were prepared to introduce or co-sponsor such a bill, but would not name them on the record.

Dostis and Lorber said they would support a gender identity

of the state Supreme Court Justices and ten other judges. He had been on the same panel in 1999, but was not reappointed by the Republican leadership in the 2000 session. The Judicial Retention Committee was one avenue conservatives had hoped to use to rid the Supreme Court of the justices who authored or concurred with the *Baker v. State* ruling.

The Judicial Retention Committee is made up of four Representatives and four Senators. It will hold three public hearings and take oral and written testimony as to the fitness of the judges. The committee then reports to the Joint Assembly of both House and Senate

power come from?" He added that when the plant is shut down, the spent fuel would be placed in above-ground storage anyway.

Wind energy is similarly complicated, but Dostis thinks wind might make sense as an energy source that causes minimal harm and keeps energy dollars within the state – if siting decisions are made appropriately.

Rep. Steve Howard is hoping to use his Transportation vice-chairmanship to enlarge the committee's focus on roads and bridges to include alternative transport, such as rail and mass transit. The rail infrastructure is in as bad shape as the road and bridges, he suggested, despite the fact that both sets are state-owned. "Rail is a big issue in Rutland," he said.

Rep. Jason Lorber said his Institutions Committee is one of the four capital budget committees and has oversight of the Corrections Department. "Corrections is such a huge drain that we are not able to address other issues. My district is particularly impacted – a lot of old North End residents are involved with corrections. There are people who are not being released [from prison] for the lack of transitional housing."

Lorber pointed with pride to his name as an original co-sponsor of the Drug Re-importation bill, and issued a "friendly challenge" to lesbians, bisexuals and transgenders to "get involved politically." Citing an AP report, most of the women who ran for office were asked to run, while men just decided to go ahead. "You are being asked," he declared. ▼

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Rep. Robert Dostis (D-Waterbury)

bill, although he requested drafting language before the session began. The bill would amend the various Vermont statutes to include transgender people among Vermonters who are currently protected from discrimination on the basis of sex, sexual orientation, marital status, race, color, religion, national origin, age, or handicapping condition.

nondiscrimination bill. Howard hedged, saying that while he's against discrimination of any kind, he'd have to see the specifics of the bill.

Which Judges Stay

Lippert was also named to chair the Judicial Retention Committee, which will be reviewing the tenures

members, who vote on whether to retain each judge or justice. Because the ballot is secret, the members may vote differently than expected or contradict the committee's recommendations.

Other Committees

Rep. Dostis is looking forward to sinking his teeth into energy issues