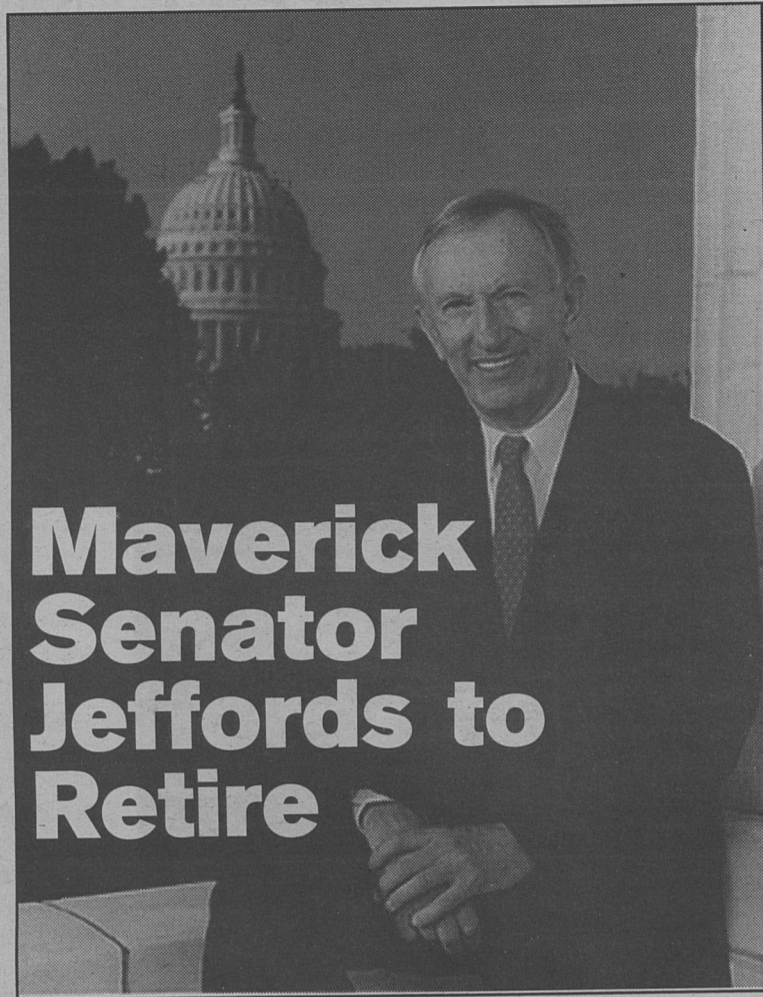


BY PAUL OLSEN

Burlington – Independent U.S. Sen. James Jeffords' decision to retire rather than seek reelection in 2006 set off a game of political musical chairs with politicians from throughout Vermont deciding what their next move would be.

Jeffords unexpectedly announced his retirement on April 20. "After much thought and consultation with my family and staff, I have decided to close this chapter of my service to Vermont, and not seek re-election in 2006," he said. "Between now and the end of my term, I will be working overtime to accomplish as much as I can for Vermont, in education, the environment, agriculture, health care and so many other areas."

Since being elected to the Senate in 1988, Jeffords has received favorable ratings from the Human Rights Campaign, a Washington DC-based gay advocacy group. He also received a National Leadership Award from AIDS Action and cosponsors the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), a bill to outlaw employment discrimination based on sexual orientation. Although he supports Vermont's civil union law enacted in 2000, Jeffords voted for the antigay Defense



of Marriage Act (DOMA) in 1996.

In 2001, Jeffords made history by abandoning the GOP and temporarily handing control of the U.S. Senate to the Democratic Party.

Gay activists were quick to praise Vermont's retiring senator. "Senator Jeffords has been a strong advocate for equality and will truly be missed," Human Rights Campaign President

Joe Solmonese said. "Through the years, the Senator has stood on the side of fairness for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Americans. From his work leading the charge to fight employment discrimination, to being a driving force on the Ryan White CARE Act, to his efforts to reform pension plans for equitable treatment, to his own office policy protecting GLBT employees, Senator Jeffords is a strong and independent voice in the

fight for equal rights."

Critics were equally fast in celebrating the announcement. "In case you forgot, Jeffords is the U.S. Senator who stabbed President Bush in the back by quitting our Party in 2001 and handing control of the U.S. Senate over to the liberal Democrats led by Tom Daschle," Greg Parke, a former Air Force pilot seeking the GOP nomination for Senate, wrote in a fundraising email to supporters. "His personal act of political treachery helped the Democrats block much of President Bush's first term agenda."

While the race to replace Jeffords began shortly after his announcement, Vermont's gay and lesbian community is left wondering whether he'll be replaced by an equally pro gay legislator.

Independent U.S. Rep. Bernie Sanders plans to run for the seat and could easily fill Jeffords' shoes. Sanders has consistently garnered 100 percent positive ratings from the Human Rights Campaign and received a 100 percent rating from the AIDS Action Council. His congressional office maintains a written nondiscrimination policy including sexual orientation, he is a co-sponsor of the Employment Nondiscrimination Act (ENDA), and he voted against DOMA.

Likely GOP candidates Lt. Governor Brian Dubie and Greg Parke are unlikely to be as supportive as Sanders.

Dubie opposes Vermont's civil union compromise and supports amending the U.S. Constitution to prohibit gay marriage. In his unsuccessful campaign for the U.S. House of Representatives in 2004, Greg Parke pledged to promote "conservative values and principles" and combat "the homosexual agenda."

Burlington businessman Richard Tarrant, a political neophyte, is also interested in the seat.

One candidate who will not seek to replace Jim Jeffords in the U.S. Senate is Republican Governor James Douglas. On April 30 Douglas said he would run for a third term as Governor. "I believe I can make the greatest contribution to improving our state by continuing to serve as governor," he said. "So I will not run for the United States Senate." ▼

Paul Olsen lives and works in Colchester, and also writes for the Boston-based In Newsweekly.

Gender Identity Bill Stalled

Montpelier – The bill that would add the terms "gender identity and expression" to Vermont's nondiscrimination legislation (H.478) appeared stalled at press time. House Judiciary Chairman Bill Lippert (D-Hinesburg) said he still hopes to take more testimony and get the bill out for a floor vote this session, but that other issues have taken nearly all the committee's time. Among those issues are considerations of changes to

Corrections Department policies (a compilation of bills now called the "Safe Communities" bill) and a bill to allow the state to incarcerate sexual predators for treatment after their sentences have been served (H.108, Civil Commitment).

"I am pleased that we've been able to do some successful work [on H.478] outside the committee, and I am hopeful that we will be able to take some more testimony and move the bill forward this session," said Lippert in a

phone interview. A few questions remain, he said, regarding the appropriate definitions to include in the bill, which in its draft form had no definitions of the term "gender identity and expression."

The legislature has voted to extend the funding for its session into the first week of June. It is unlikely that a bill voted out of the House at the very end of the session would be considered by the Senate before adjournment for the year.

Equality Vermont's Virginia Renfrew said it is up to the community to keep the pressure on to get the Gender Identity and Expression bill out of the House Judiciary Committee and onto the floor. If it is approved by the House this year, the bill will be considered in the Senate Judiciary Committee in the second half of the biennium, beginning next January.

Besides Chairman Lippert, members of the House

Judiciary Committee include: Maxine Grad (D-Moretown), vice chair; Alison Clarkson (D-Woodstock); Thomas DePoy (R-Rutland); Avis Gervais (D-Enosburg); Richard Hube (R-South Londonderry); Willem Jewett (D-Ripton); Michael Kainen (R-Hartford); Patti Komline (R-Dorset); and Richard Marek (D-Newfane). ▼