

## Squires Looks Ahead to Legislative Session

OITM recently asked newly-elected and openly gay Representative Ron Squires (D-Windham County) what he looked forward to as he prepared to take office in the Vermont state legislature. Here's what he told us:

"In general, it's going to be a tough year because there's no money, which is going to be a problem, particularly when we want to increase funding for educational work with HIV and AIDS infections. Vermont still remains one of only five states which puts no state funds into AIDS education. That means it's going to be very difficult to get money, so it may mean readjusting budgets rather than coming up with new money for programs like that.

"Certainly also, in terms of gay issues, the Gay Rights Bill has been – already has been – introduced. Althea Kroger is preparing its exact wording for introduction into

the Senate and a Republican from Burlington or South Burlington, I expect, will introduce it in the House.

"The thing that will be different this year is that Althea is really prepared to put up a good battle in the Sante, where we already know we have the votes. In the House, the fact that it will be sponsored by a Republican legislator (and that I'm going to be right there) changes, I think, the tone of what will take place. What I find exciting is that I'm going into the legislature not being viewed as a gay legislator, which in some ways will have its benefits when we come to debate those issues, because I think I'll be able to draw support from some of the other legislators who will identify with the issue differently because of other relationships I have with them.

I've been involved in politics in Vermont for twenty years, have been seven years on a school board as an openly gay member – usually one place you don't put us is 'in charge of your kids,' as it were. I was instrumental in writing the first AIDS policy in Vermont school systems at the High School in Brattleboro.

"The amazing thing is that in all of these years I have never had a negative comment made as a result of being gay. And as I said, if there's going to be some reaction from the right wing, it's if gays and lesbians try to become too involved in the school system.

"I do lots of other things in the town I'm from, too, from being lister, cemetery commissioner, things like that, and having grown up on a dairy farm in Gilford.

"I'm also the senior member of the Democratic State Committee in terms of years of service, even though I'm still one of the younger members. That means I'm going to at least have

a direct line of communication to the legislative leadership, which is going to be a real plus when issues of importance to our community come up.

"Most of the legislators are very quick in conversations to ask about my lover if we're talking about relationships or families, and I'm very quick to point out differences, too, in a quiet sort of way. And at times, when it makes a difference, I've been very vocal.

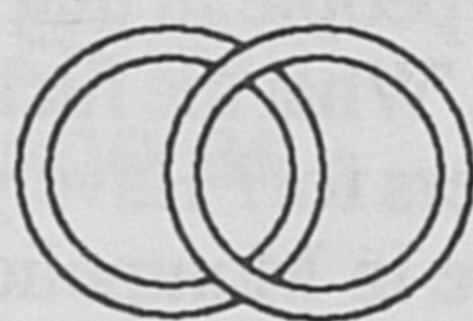
"I first publicly came out in response to some attacks on a gay bar in the southern part of the state, in Bellows Falls in the late 70's. That response was led by a Democratic county Chairman, who I had helped to select to replace me as the Chair. That was quickly reported by the press, and there was coverage of my leading the state delegation to the Democratic Presidential Nominating convention in 1988. There was also some coverage when I was elected Vice-Chairman of the party five years ago, because it was the first time in the history of the country, of either major party, that a gay man or a lesbian had been one of the two presiding officers of a state party. It was one of the very few times that there's been openly gay members of the Democratic National Committee. Terje Anderson is also on the committee.

"A while ago in Boston there was the fifth annual meeting of gay and lesbian elected officials, which has now also been extended to appointed officials, and there's been a huge increase in both the number of people elected as openly lesbian or gay candidates and people who have come out in the years since they were elected. There are more and more in the Northeast all the time.

"There's a willingness on the part of straight officials in a lot of the small towns, or if not a willingness then an acceptance that there are gay people, something that noone would even talk about fifteen or twenty years ago. I'll go to meetings and people will ask 'How's John?' Twenty years ago they would not have felt comfortable enough or known how to ask how one's lover is without seeming awkward.

"Part of it, I think, is because there are more and more of us who are willing to do it – to run for office and be open about it. It really smashes people's stereotypes about who we are. If I spend a day milking cows (continued on next page)

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