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Sullivan: Legislature had a good year after all

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By **Linda Joy Sullivan**

Some have suggested that the end of this year's legislation was marred by embarrassing tumult, intra-party bickering and failure. I have a completely different take.

Unlike last year, when more than a few of my colleagues seemed openly pre-occupied with the prospect of advancing bills that would bait a governor's veto (it being an election year, after all), this session we as a group seemed to focus more on fine tuning legislation introduced to advance important policy objectives.

As I wrote several months ago, passing laws on complex subjects is really difficult work, and just "saying no" to pressures to pass feel good legislation often serves to better the quality of our law making. I found the floor debates on the legislation we considered and sometimes passed more often than not robust and productive, and I especially commend the very hard work of several House Committees with which I worked this past year to improve bills so as to achieve not only consensus with the Senate but to actually avoid wasteful veto showdowns with Gov. Phil Scott.

Ultimately, the divisions evidenced at the end of the session, when the House Speaker boldly declined to succumb to the Senate's strategy of blocking passage of an entirely uncontroversial budget in order to force substantive policy concessions by the House, suggest to me not a sign of failure but a harbinger of a more mature legislature, one whose leaders will likely come to next year's session with resolve to make necessary concessions in order to achieve compromise and consensus, and with it real progress on issues important to Vermonters.

Many of my colleagues, nonetheless, plainly worrying about a public perception of failure by the legislature, quickly paraded out at the conclusion of the session their laundry list of all of the achievements of the legislature. I actually found our "accomplishments" this year to be unremarkable and few.

But, keeping with the theme that the task of legislating soundly is difficult work, that's no condemnation of what we did this past session. Minimum wage will be back next year. So will paid family leave. I supported both in principle but I also saw the need seriously to improve both. I'm thinking that will actually happen in 2020 and we will be better for the six to nine month delay in passage.

If there was any reason to be disappointed it was — and at the risk of over simplification — in our seeming hesitancy to take on harder projects. We must come up with a plan around our unfunded pension liability and our education financing system needs to be better tuned to avoid the yearly temptation of using the property-tax-sourced fund to meet general fund needs. And in our occasional embrace of illusory easy fixes to our most vexing problems like setting out to address climate change not by fashioning comprehensive carbon emissions policies and programs — such as those suggested by the Administration and by me and some of my colleagues who introduced much more visionary legislation — but by simply increasing taxes so as to increase funding of the Department of Children and Families' low income weatherization program.

There were clearly exceptions. We took on hard assignments. We commenced a long look at Act 250 and there are bundles of hard policy questions we will likely be asked to address next year. There was every reason not to try to rush through land use legislation this year. And reason likewise prevailed when we found existing funding sources to help finance the Lake Champlain clean up over the taxes some advocated we impose on what is one of the most important segments of the Vermont's future economy and borrowings from the education fund.

In other areas, we squarely and definitively addressed policy questions that needed attention: around securing statutory and constitutional protections of a woman's reproductive rights; as to responsible gun ownership; as to the adoption of a correctional "good time" system that should better serve the rehabilitative goals of sentencing; around mitigating the catastrophe that has been creeping up on us over the prevalent uses of disposable plastics in the retail industry during the last 50-plus years.

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All in, it wasn't such a bad session after all. I'm looking forward to next year.

Speaking of next year, however, let me share a little legislative "inside baseball" about a recent "rule change" made by the House at the urging of party leadership that may affect how interested constituents should approach legislative proposals. Under the rule any proposed new bills must be submitted for drafting and ultimate introduction many weeks before the start of the legislative session, effectively imposing deadlines in the year-end holiday months of November and December.

What that means, in essence, is that constituents and advocates cannot afford to squander the summer and early months of Autumn by deferring work on legislative reforms with their individual legislators. It's imperative that voters interact with their representatives early and often during the "off season" about their work in the upcoming

session.

Finally, I am pleased to announce that, in my capacity as Northeast Director of the National Foundation of Women Legislators – a thoroughly non-partisan, policy-focused organization largely made up of female state legislators around the country. We will be hosting a summit of my fellow Northeast state directors including those from as far away as D.C. and Pennsylvania in August in the Northshire to address legislative agendas in our respective states on matters of common concern to residents in the Northeast.

This work should naturally complement my work, as newly appointed Vermont State Director for another national organization, Women in Government, by which I hope to be able to harvest elements of some of the best initiatives launched in other parts of the country on important legislative policy questions.

As in past years I hold normal office hours during the off-session months at my usual locations in Dorset, Danby/Mount Tabor and Peru. I invite you in the coming months to visit and talk about issues of interest to you.

All of my contact information and meeting details are published on my website: www.lindajoyullivan4vermont.com.

Rep. Linda Joy Sullivan represents Bennington-Rutland (Dorset, Peru, Landgrove, Danby and Mt. Tabor) in the Vermont House of

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