

## *Montpelier and local control*

BY REP. LINDA JOY SULLIVAN There is little doubt that Governor Scott was swept into office due in no small part to anti-Montpelier, anti-big-government sentiment, and promises of “no new taxes.” It’s been with some amazement that we see Montpelier set out once again to discount local interests in the pursuit of the larger Montpelier agenda.

The placement of much of the strain of the “no new taxes” pledge on our local school districts, and the demand that our dedicated voluntary school boards completely re-work their budgets under the blunt (Montpelier) mandate that they give up local flexibility, ran into the impediment of the timing of our traditional Town Meeting approvals of school budgets. Hence, the solution sought was to set up a completely separate one-issue school budget voting day (imagine the meager turnout we’d have, effectively disenfranchising local voters, notwithstanding the not insignificant expense involved). This process was voted down.

There is also, of course, no more “local” an interest than the interest we have in protecting and advancing our local workers. Yet, the administration jumped on a plan to sweep into a larger, more powerful Commerce Agency the one department of State government dedicated to worker protection.

The Department of Labor — committed to ensuring that our employers play by the rules with respect to workers comp, wages, unemployment insurance and worker safety — was simply to be picked up and dropped into one megasized agency whose primary focus is the advancement of employer interests. This plan was voted down by the Senate.

From my chair on the House Commerce Committee I know the critical importance to Vermont of robust economic development. But we cannot do that work while discounting the primacy of the well-being of the hardworking employees in our communities.

The insensitivity to the importance of local choices and processes is not committed to the executive branch.

The legislature’s recent determination to take over the process of vote counting with respect to the closely decided victory by Rep. Bob Frenier (R-Chelsea) threatens a dangerous precedent.

Year in and year out we trust our local town clerks to count our ballots, and to do so with the neutrality and integrity we have come to count on. Deciding local races through Montpelierdivined processes — without the slightest hint that there was any irregularity at the local level — creates the risk that Montpelier rules can be resorted to in other close contests to come by disappointed candidates seeking to challenge ballot choices locally made, locally counted and locally certified.

The need to ensure that local voices are appropriately heard and measured as to the most important of issues affecting our towns is why I am asking my colleagues to take up again the question of local input on wind turbine siting projects. Although much attention was paid to the issue in the legislature’s last session (and I recognize that many are weary of the issue), current law ensures local input on siting questions only by instructing the Public Service Board pay “due consideration” to local recommendations — an inherently vague instruction that has left the courts bewildered. As such, it serves as no meaningful instruction at all. We all know that property values, and the quality of life and of our wilderness areas, can be dramatically affected by a bad Montpelier turbine siting decision. It’s why I introduced H.87, a bill that would require the PSB (and the courts) to presume that local recommendations are valid and reasonable and to place the burden of persuasion on a party seeking to overturn local choices on the matter.

It's simple. Local voices matter. They need to be respected.

Please join me at my constituent business hours. My contact info: LSullivan@leg.

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