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Sullivan working to bridge gap between legislature and governor

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By Rep. Linda Joy Sullivan

Last week we opened our 2019-20 legislative session under the new "super majority" now enjoyed by the Democratic Party in the House and Senate. There's a sense of optimism around the Statehouse that the Democratic-controlled legislature will be able to advance its "agenda," even initiatives opposed by the Administration. I'm hoping, however, that we will see more collaboration and working together between the legislature and the administration.

Given the results at the polls in November, it's hard to deny the argument that Gov. Phil Scott enjoys a bit of a voter mandate. Where he seems to connect best with the public is articulating our need to grow our population, as well as build on what can only be described as our current anemic efforts to grow our tax base and to improve economic opportunities for all Vermonters. Plainly, increasing the collective prosperity of Vermont is essential.

Scott has consistently delivered an easy-to-understand message stressing the need to deal with the stark realities facing the state. We, as legislators, need to pay attention to the message being delivered in turn by Vermont's voters. Despite the rhetoric we heard around the Statehouse last year, Vermont didn't suffer a decline in its credit score (that is, its bond rating) because we have a

Republican governor who was vetoing legislation. Rather, the rating agencies — who approach their jobs without regard to politics — recognize the consequence of our aging population and less than robust prospects for economic growth.

At the risk of over-simplification, there are, in my view, several reasons we are stuck in an economic development quagmire.

Despite the administration's messaging, the governor has yet to deliver to the legislature a robust plan to deal with our economic prospects. There's not much forward-looking vision or concrete proposals behind his astute description of our likely future. Of course, a "no new taxes" commitment translates to a "no new spending" modality, and we aren't going to shake our economic woes by standing still.

However, some of the inertia around development activity may be the function of our legislature's seeming lack of interest in proposals advanced by the administration on virtually any subject. Given that the legislature in Vermont lacks an abundance of "staff," we have to rely on the administration — and its teams of dedicated career subject matter experts — to play an important role in setting the agenda and shaping public dialogue. We're stuck if administration proposals are virtually "dead on arrival" at the Statehouse.

Thus, many of us were pleased to read several weeks ago of Senate president pro tem Tim Ashe's open desire to work with the administration to achieve solutions to Vermont's more vexing problems. That, of course, means a commitment to dialogue — and early dialogue — and we haven't seen much of that lately. If we are going to achieve the sorts of compromises the legislature in Massachusetts recently achieved with its Republican governor, then there must be a willingness on both sides to have a genuine discussion about our options, and a genuine openness to compromise. So, let's see in the coming weeks how legislative leadership responds to the governor's budget message. Let's see, too, if the administration approaches the session with a purpose of actually getting things done.

For my part, I am very busy finalizing legislation I will be sponsoring this year:

I have just introduced with my co-lead sponsor, Rep. Cynthia Browning, a tri-partisan sponsored bill that will if passed create a toxic substances medical monitoring remedy without some of the more sweeping elements of the bill that led the governor to veto the legislation last year. It's important that we get to "yes" on this important legislation.

I plan to introduce a bill that will propose very specific carbon emission solutions aimed at Vermont's largest challenges — automobile emissions and residential housing heating inefficiencies — and do it in a way that will reduce the need for taxes (including through a divestiture program) while mitigating the impact of carbon solutions on rural Vermonters and lower income families.

I also plan to advance a series of Act 250 process reform proposals. These are aimed at strengthening the authority and role of our District Environmental Commissions in applying that law's

environmental and community-based criteria, while also increasing citizen access to the courts and streamlining the often-lengthy appeals process.

Rep. Linda Joy Sullivan represents Danby, Dorset, Mount Tabor, Landgrove and Peru in the Vermont House of Representatives.



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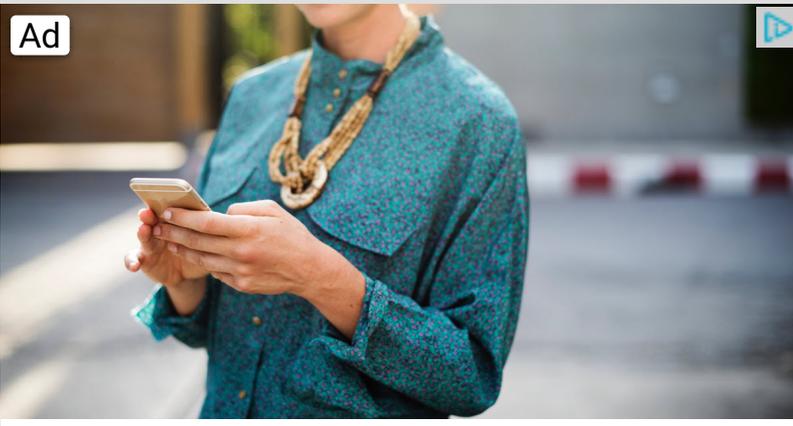
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