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Meet Bennington County's two new representatives

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MANCHESTER - Bennington County will have two new representatives in the Vermont House when the Legislature convenes in January - one a Republican replacing a Democrat and the other vice versa.

Brian Keefe, a Republican from Manchester, was the top vote-getter in a three-way race in the two-seat Bennington-4 House district, in which five-term Rep. Cynthia Browning, D-Arlington, was re-elected and Democratic Rep. Steve Berry of Manchester finished third and lost in his bid for a second term.

In the Bennington-Rutland House district race, Democrat Linda Joy Sullivan, like Keefe making her first run for political office, defeated Dorset Select Board member Jack Stannard in Tuesday's election.

Although a freshman rep, Keefe is no stranger to the Statehouse or to politics, having worked as a legislative aide to the late U.S. Sen. Jim Jeffords in Vermont and Washington, and in a government affairs role with Central Vermont Public Service Corp., advocating for the former utility in Montpelier.

"I spent a lot of time in the Statehouse," Keefe said, "testifying in committees in the House and Senate. I'm pretty comfortable walking in there. But I'm sure some of it will be new to me, sitting on the other side of the table, so to speak."

Sullivan also has experience interacting with government officials. She was appointed to - the Children and Family Council for Prevention Programs by Gov. Peter Shumlin. In addition to operating her auditing business, Sullivan also is executive director and founder of the anti-human trafficking nonprofit, Building Empowerment by Stopping Trafficking.

"I'm not a stranger to advocacy or to legislatures," she said.

The representative-elect said her work with BEST also involves teaching judges about human trafficking, such as recognizing the red flags, the role of gangs or its reach into schools, and the many traumatic consequences for trafficking victims.

"It is exciting," Sullivan said of her pending new role as legislator, "but I am also coming in with a conservative excitement. I take this very seriously."

One of the state's overriding concerns, she said, will be "to do everything we can in Vermont to mitigate any shifts that come down from the federal level" - with Republicans soon to be in control of the presidency and the U.S. House and Senate.

Sullivan said that could mean protecting funding that supports the state's leadership status among the states on access to health care insurance, alternative energy expansion and on other issues.

She added that she believes Republican Gov.-elect Phil Scott will fully analyze all proposals in both those areas before proposing changes.

Keefe said he expects the influence and leverage he and fellow Republicans will have in the Legislature will be enhanced by the election of Scott as governor. With an expected 52 members of his party in the House, Keefe said the GOP should be able to sustain a veto by the governor, "if it comes to that," on important issues.

The Democrats expect to have 84 seats in the House, which also will have an expected seven Progressives and seven independents.

"I think that statewide the message was that we need a more responsible government and not more tax increases," Keefe said.

The approach his party and the governor-elect have advocated is one of "a return to sustainable budgets and a path that avoids more taxes," Keefe said.

A major issue for Keefe's district concerns Act 46, which encourages the consolidation of school districts, and new rules that the State Board of Education is proposing for independent or private schools.

Opponents contend those rules would have a significant negative effect on schools like Burr and Burton Academy in Manchester. Among provisions are that faculty at the private schools would be required to hold a state teaching license.

The Northshire area is one of several in the state where having school choice "is just something we have historically had," Keefe said, adding that officials from areas lacking that tradition aren't familiar with that type of system, "and people are talking past one another right now. We need to have more discussion on this."

The Republican also expressed misgivings about proposed legalization of marijuana for adults in Vermont, which failed to get through the House this year. "I have heard from a lot of people who have very serious concerns, from the perspective of enforcement and the kind of message it would send to high school students," he said. "I think we need to do a lot more before we take that step, and that also is not somewhere we would want to spend a lot of time and energy. There are more important issues."

As a legislator, Sullivan also wants to protect the school choice options that are important in the Northshire, and has "every intention of being vocal" on those issues.

"I think we should hold back on some of the [proposed new] rules that endanger choice," she said. "I don't think we need to panic, but we do need to address this."

On Act 46 and proposed school district consolidation plans in the Northshire and elsewhere, Sullivan said the goals are reasonable, but added, "I think we need to revisit this and clarify Act 46."

On economic development, Sullivan said the area has to move forward more quickly on the collaborative regional efforts already underway, involving business and development organizations. And she called for continued expansion of access to broadband internet services and options.

As a public auditor with clients around the country, she said services allowing large document transfers, Skype and other communication options have improved in the Dorset area over the past four or five years. But she advocates a greater emphasis on that, as well as programs in local schools to better familiarize youth with subjects like computer coding, accounting methods and the legal system. She believes that could lead to a stronger local economy and slow the flight of young people to other states in search of career opportunities.

Operating her auditing business, Sullivan notes a lower level of acceptance of use of Skype and other online options in Vermont than she experienced living in Florida and New York City. "I think there has been a bit of a fear," she said.

Collaborative efforts that involve the "very experienced aging population" in the Northshire also should be pursued, she said.

Reflecting on her first run for office, Sullivan said, "The first 48 hours were restful, as I got to get off the campaign trail. But now it's back to work."

Going door to door and attending numerous events and small-scale meetings with voters, she said she met thousands of "wonderful and interesting people from our communities."

She also offered thanks to outgoing Republican Rep. Patti Komline, who did not seek another term, for her years of service to the district. "And I look forward to representing all the constituents of this district," she said.

"I had never run for anything before," Keefe said, adding that overall he enjoyed the experience, despite the surprising amount of work required.

"There was a lot of work by volunteers, friends, family," he said, along with key advice he received from people he met during his years of working with Vermont lawmakers while representing CVPS.

"I was exceedingly proud of the folks who volunteered and helped make me the top vote-getter in the district," he said. "I was quite humbling."

Contact Jim Therrien at 802-447-7567, ext. 114. @BB_therrien on Twitter.

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