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Vermont voters

Coventry landfill

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- Criminal Justice
- Education
- Energy & Environment
- Health Care
- Politics
- People & Places

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Linda Joy Sullivan: Let's get to work on climate

By **Commentary**

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Editor's note: This commentary is by Rep. Linda Joy Sullivan, of Dorset, a Democrat who represents the Bennington-Rutland District in the Vermont House of Representatives and is a member of the House Committee on Commerce and Economic Development.

As I watched last week's debate in Rutland between Gov. Phil Scott and challenger Christine Hallquist, my thoughts kept returning to the question of whether Vermont is going to be able to step up responsibly to contribute to a solution to the momentous climate change challenge we are facing. Since the recent UN report — and the dire predictions for even the near-term future — many have questioned whether there exists on a national level the political will to even begin the difficult collective action necessary to address the problem.

No matter who is elected governor next month, I fear we won't be up to the task either due to base partisanship or due to the dysfunction inherent in how we elect our state's chief executive for scant two-year terms.

We saw last year during our legislative session an abundance of partisan political play and brinksmanship. Both the Legislature and the administration bore some level of responsibility. Too often I saw administration proposals being rejected (at times summarily) because they were proposals from the Scott administration, at times even hearing the sentiment of some of my colleagues that forcing the administration into vetoes could be used for political gain during this election cycle; yet I also saw positions advanced by the administration that appeared to be edicts and refusals to consider certain legislative proposals that were expressed by the governor in absolute terms.

Returning to the prospects ahead of us over the next two years:

On the one hand, if Gov. Scott is re-elected, I am concerned that the Legislature will insist principally on the passage of a regressive and unpopular carbon tax (even knowing it to be destined for veto). Compound that with the possibility that our governor will refuse to engage in dialogue on the tax no matter how surgically constructed it is to avoid a regressive impact upon lower income and rural Vermonters. The risk ahead is that, by

making the passage of a carbon tax the focal point of the next year's efforts, the hard work and the many specific recommendations (53 of them) recently advanced by Gov. Scott's Climate Action Commission will be ignored.

On the other hand, if Christine Hallquist becomes our governor, the work of the Climate Action Commission may well immediately be relegated to the dustbin of the "prior administration" and that a new period of study and deliberation on different proposals will be started. I heard as much from Hallquist in Rutland (read: her embrace of the relatively unvetted "Solar Pathways" plan). The U.N. climate report makes clear that our political leaders don't have the luxury of even two more years of study. When we elect one-term governors for a short two-year stay tremendous breakage and costs occasioned by the massive turnover in the leadership of our administrations occurs. Momentum around fixing our most difficult problems is almost always lost due to the perceived need by new leadership to "reset" government.

Vermonters would be wise to insist, no matter the result of our upcoming gubernatorial election, that our Legislature and administration do three things next year:

First, on Week One of the next legislative session, both sides come to the table with the Vermont Climate Action Change Commission report in hand prepared in good faith to begin work through the proposals, rejecting recommendations that aren't efficacious and embracing elements that will work. The substantive work of that commission was done by non-political subject matter experts embedded in our current administration, many of whom will survive the results of the election. Let's not let the work of the last 18 months be for naught.

Second, if there is to be sentiment by the Legislature for a carbon tax, both parties have to come to work prepared to study and discuss how it can be pulled off without it being (1) regressive and (2) essentially punitive to Vermont consumers who are not in a position effectively to reduce high-carbon behavior. That is the essential challenge of a carbon tax — a regressive tax can be mitigated by tax rebates to those less able to afford them; however, laying the burden of the tax on the remaining Vermonters is absolutely unfair (and entirely ineffective) if the consumer is unable to reduce carbon consumption through, for example, the purchase of relatively unavailable EV vehicles and the whole-house installation of residential heat transfer systems. If a carbon tax is put on the table, everyone needs to engage in a frank and candid dialogue about whether it can be made to work.

Third, if the parties can overcome the carbon tax challenge, both sides must be committed to making the tax "revenue positive." A tax that increases consumer costs for the sake only of increasing costs (the principal objective of a carbon tax) while "rebating" monies to the less fortunate is — unless it actually curbs negative behaviors — largely an income redistribution plan. Rather than rebate monies, whatever revenues are collected should be used directly to subsidize a retrofit of Vermont homes to be more fuel efficient (and we could start with the homes of those least able to afford to undertake the work). We in Vermont have an abundant hydro-electric supply of energy from Canada; we also have to recognize the relative unavailability in the next few years of EV vehicles and supporting infrastructure; mitigating inefficiencies in our homes, however, is plainly the most direct way we in Vermont can contribute to our climate challenge. We absolutely need to address that problem directly — but to do so we need first to ensure a non-regressive and fundamentally fair tax.



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