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Rep. Scott Campbell: Vermont's Response To The Climate Crisis

Rep. Scott Campbell

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I serve on the House Energy and Technology Committee. On Tuesday, we completed several weeks of work on the Global Warming Solutions Act, H.688. We approved it on a vote of 7 to 2.

Just before the final markup and vote on Tuesday, we took testimony from the Administration's Secretary of Natural Resources. That Agency is charged with regulating pollution among other things. The Secretary presented a nearly complete re-write of the bill; however she was working from an earlier version. Later versions already incorporated several of the Secretary's changes, and we added another at her suggestion. We declined other ideas that ran contrary to the intent of the Committee.

However, the Secretary made clear that the Administration backs the overall effort to address greenhouse gas emissions and resilience and adaptation in the face of climate change. As well, both of the Committee's "no" votes were constructive participants in developing the bill, and I believe are fully aware of the hazards that climate change poses for Vermont.

The bill lays the foundation of the State's response to climate change. It creates a Climate Council, made up of Agency heads and chaired by the Secretary of Administration, and including 14 experts in various topic areas to be appointed by the Legislature (who would not be members of the Legislature). The Council's purpose is to conduct research and analysis, and craft a Climate Action Plan.

The Agency of Natural Resources then will draft rules to implement the Plan. ANR already has broad rule-making authority to regulate pollutants; this bill focuses that authority on meeting specific requirements. Where ANR, or VTrans or Ag or other agency, lacks rule-

making authority, they will have to come back to the Legislature for authorization. Where fees are to be imposed or raised, they will have to be approved by the Legislature.

The “specific requirements” ANR must meet include binding obligations to hit longstanding greenhouse gas reduction targets. As important, requirements also include assessing the extent of our climate resilience and adaptation, setting improvement targets, and developing guidance to achieve them.

Both requirements are vital. Vermont has a responsibility to rein in our emissions. Following Trump’s withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement, Governor Scott joined 23 states to form the United States Climate Alliance, committing Vermont to the Paris goals. Further, public officials have a responsibility not to ignore the obvious. We must face the impacts of climate change, or we are failing our communities, our State, and our children.

Some have taken an extremist view of this bill (“Worst Democracy-Shredding Bill in 50 Years”, John McClaughry, Caledonian-Record, Jan. 27). Mr. McClaughry’s mockery of the climate crisis makes clear he does not believe what 99% of climate scientists are telling us; what the military, insurance companies, credit rating agencies, VTrans, and local road commissioners are planning for; and what realists in all parties including the Governor recognize. Humans are driving climate change, it is accelerating, and we must both transition away from a fossil-fuel-based economy and prepare for the unstable climate already baked into the system.

Others take the view that climate change is a far-off, global threat, that we should be focusing instead on Vermont’s demographic crisis, developing our rural economy, and creating a business-friendly environment. I agree 100 percent with these priorities. They are not opposing issues, but complementary.

The path to a thriving St. Johnsbury and rural Vermont lies in seizing the opportunities presented by the energy transition. Efficiency in buildings, electric-vehicle charging network, renewable generation, battery storage, micro-grids — these businesses and more offer solid, well paying jobs that also send less of our money out of state to pump fossil fuels and keep it here to circulate in our economy.

Of course these jobs aren’t the only path to rebuilding St. Johnsbury and the NEK. We also

must make smarter investments in education, housing, health care, arts, recreation, transportation, and community. But the use and abuse of energy threads through everything.

The Global Warming Solutions Act is about holding our elected and appointed officials accountable for confronting the challenges posed by climate change, and for navigating the impending transition to a low-carbon economy in a way that allows Vermonters to thrive. Governor Scott is right to focus on addressing the demographic challenge; I hope he also recognizes that truly confronting the climate crisis is a vital part of doing so when the bill reaches his desk.

Rep. Scott Campbell, D-Caledonia 3, lives in St. Johnsbury.