

Scott Campbell

What's The Governor Waiting For?

Governor Phil Scott and his Administration have, on the whole, done an excellent job during this pandemic. They have listened to experts, anticipated actions that would need to be taken, and moved quickly to take them. As a result, the health impact of the virus in Vermont has been far less than it could have been.

All of which makes apparent blind spots more puzzling. Sure, the huge surge in unemployment claims overwhelmed the system. But it was certainly predictable. After two months of agony for folks with no income, I have to wonder, why there wasn't more focus on it?

And face masks. This seems pretty straight-forward: make them mandatory. Sure, some people will complain and still not wear them. But the public-health benefit is clear. Health Commissioner Mark Levine talks about it all the time.

Most glaring at the moment, why is the Governor balking at agreeing with our elections expert, Secretary of State Jim Condos, to mail ballots to all voters for the November general election?

At his Monday press confer-

ence, Governor Scott said he was in favor of taking all the steps necessary to set up for mail ballots. He just didn't want to make the final decision until after the August primary election. He said, correctly, that general election ballots cannot be printed until the results of the primary anyway.

Sounds reasonable. But Secretary Condos says there is a lot more preparation needed before that point, and that preparation needs to start now — actually it should have started weeks ago. Contracts must be solicited and signed, and materials ordered. Mailings need to go out over the summer to update voter checklists.

It doesn't make sense to go to that expense in time and money unless we are committed to using an all-mail ballot. We missed the window for trying out the system for the August primary, and if we don't move quickly the window will close for the November general, too. (In-person voting on election day can't be eliminated, but many fewer people would need it.)

No one knows the course of this



pandemic. But experts agree we will still be dealing with it this fall (and beyond). And it's very possible we will see a resurgence in infections before then that will require another "stay home, stay safe" order during the November election.

If that happens, and we have not set up an all-mail ballot, people will be requesting mail ballots individually, creating a huge workload for town clerks. People who can't get a mail ballot in time will be forced to vote in person, backing up procedures modified to accommodate social distancing. Inevitably some will give up, others will be effectively denied the right and duty to vote.

So why the hesitation? I haven't heard the Governor offer specifics, but I can speculate on some legitimate concerns. For one, lots of registered voters don't vote. Even this year, with turnout likely to be high, up to one-third of mailed ballots could be wasted. It offends my conservative yankee conscience, but I don't see a way to avoid that.

And then there is the worry of voter fraud. For mail ballots, vot-

ers must sign the envelope containing their ballot, but who really knows if that person is the one who filled out the ballot? But with in-person voting, someone can show up, register, and vote, without identification or even a piece of mail with an in-town address. Is it a problem? In our small state, where poll workers typically see the same voters every election, no, it is not much of a problem. Experts say voter fraud is "infinitesimally small." There's no reason to suppose it will be worse with an all-mail ballot.

Voting by mail has been increasing in any case. Vermont's 2016 and 2018 general elections saw about 30% of votes by mail; in St. Johnsbury the figure was nearer to 40%.

At Monday's press conference, the Governor said he would sign the bill if the Legislature passed all-mail balloting. By the time you read this, that might have happened. Or Governor Scott may have changed his mind. I am still puzzled. Why the delay?

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