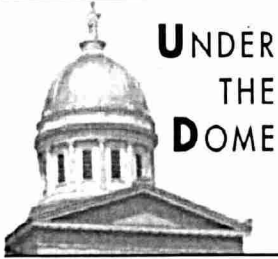


Lawmakers fret over lack of funds



UNDER
THE
DOME

By HOWARD WEISS-TISMAN
Reformer Staff

BRATTLEBORO — It is crossover time at the Statehouse and any bill that is not passed by the House or Senate this week usually has to wait until the next session to be taken up again.

It is a time of year when lawmakers are watching the calendar, but this year they are not worried about running out of time, they're worried about running out of money.

"The problem is we're broke. We're in a very tough spot," said Rep. Daryl Pillsbury, I-Brattleboro. "I don't know what we're gonna do. We've got to cut spending."

The problem is, this is the time when legislators are pushing hard to get some of their pet projects on to the floor for consideration.

Hefty bills that deal with health care, housing, corrections and child care subsidies are waiting in the wings because there is simply no money to fund them.

Pillsbury said he is frustrated because many of the issues are not going away and every year the state waits, the projects are only going to get more expensive.

The Secretary of State is waiting on a new archives building

and the Department of Public Safety needs a new forensic lab, and there are still millions of dollars outstanding on school construction projects that are already completed.

Gov. James Douglas presented his budget with a proposal to reap \$50 million from leasing the state lottery. That idea has very little chance of moving forward, and so on top of all the outstanding bills, legislators need to fill a \$50 million hole.

"The governor basically gave us a deficit budget," House Majority Leader Carolyn Partridge, D-Windham, said. "It was never a realistic idea. He used the lottery as a Band-Aid. It was not a responsible proposal."

Partridge said she was proud the Legislature passed the energy bill early in the session, which she said was a priority.

But, like Pillsbury, she is worried that many of the other important bills are not going to live beyond crossover due to the tight economic outlook.

"Health care is hung up and we've got transportation and child care subsidies and job creation," Partridge said. "They all rely on money to be effective

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and we are wondering if we are going to be able to do all of it. We are really in a rotten economic situation."

Douglas, in an interview earlier this week, admitted that his lottery idea was barely treading water, but he said it was a proposal to help raise funds and he was willing to listen to any other ideas the Democrat-controlled Legislature might come up with.

"Vermonters are already paying some of the highest property taxes in the country and I am not going to raise taxes," he said. "I understand there is not wide enthusiasm but the plan is on the table and it still makes the most sense to me. This is my idea and it is the best idea we have been able to come up with."

While the money crunch has caused a bottleneck in the Statehouse, a number of bills, many of them with Windham County roots, did pass this week.

The sweatshop-free apparel bill, which was born in a class at Brattleboro Union High School, was finally approved by the House Friday.

And two bills concerning Vermont Yankee made it through the crossover deadline.

The Senate on Friday approved a bill that requires an independent safety review of the aging nuclear power plant before the Legislature supports re-licensing.

Also on Friday, the House accepted a bill that would require Yankee owner Entergy Nuclear to seek state approval before selling an electrical switchyard on its property in Vernon.

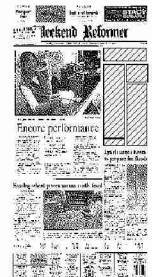
The property is part of the proposed Southern Loop project.

Rep. Sarah Edwards, P-Brattleboro, who is a member of the House Committee on Natural Resources and Energy where the bill originated, supported the bill.

She said an outdated statute on how power companies sell property had to be reconsidered.

"The old law did not provide a lot of oversight," she said. "When energy companies lease and sell land, it should come before the Public Service Board."

The House this week also passed an instant-runoff voting bill, which should strengthen the state's Progressive and Liberty Union parties and encourage more candidates to run for



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