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Another View:

NH politicians are not as green as their predecessors

By ROGER STEPHENSON

Guest Commentary

EARTH DAY is today and the state's political parties are preparing to adopt their platforms in time for a new election. It seems appropriate to take a moment and reflect on politics, New Hampshire and the environment.

The Granite State Conservation Voters Alliance examined the environmental positions of the state Democratic and Republican parties in an effort to educate ourselves and perhaps to encourage a bit of enthusiastic "one-upmanship" across the aisles. Readers are encouraged to visit the state party Web sites and see each party's environmental stance for themselves.

The environmental "planks" in the Democratic and Republican party platforms are remarkably similar. Indeed, from their preambles, can you tell the parties apart?

A. "Much of New Hampshire's economy is based on industries and businesses that depend on open space. . . ."

B. "The beauty of New Hampshire as a place to live and work depends upon a healthy environment."

(The answers can be found at the end of this column.)

- Democrats support "protection of wildlife habitat to maintain healthy, sustainable ecosystems". Republicans want to "preserve sensitive ecosystems and effectively manage wildlife"
- MtBE should be "eliminated" (Democrats) or "banned" (Republicans).

Why shouldn't the platforms be similar? Politics and the environment are intertwined. Politics may be local, and yet there is no issue more local than the environment. Step out the front door and we face ozone alerts and clean air challenges. Each time we turn on the kitchen tap the prospects of MtBE and arsenic loom.

Granite Staters can be proud that New Hampshire was recently named the "most livable state" in the nation. However, we owe a debt of gratitude and our present quality of life to a small number of politicians whose bold visions and actions over the years demonstrated real environmental leadership. Examples:

- It was Republican Gov. Frank Rollins in 1899 who called on legislators to protect the White Mountains.
- Democratic Gov. John King signed the Conservation Commission Enabling Act in 1963.
- Walter Peterson, Meldrim Thomson and Democratic and Republican legislators embraced a far-reaching amendment to our state constitution so that open land might be taxed at a lower rate that reflected its “current use” (i.e., woodlot or farm).
- Bipartisan leadership in the late 1980’s led to passage of the Rivers Management and Protection Program, the Shoreland Protection Act, and the Lakes Management and Protection Program.
- Former governors John Sununu and Jeanne Shaheen signed into law land protection initiatives (LCIP and LCHIP, respectively) brought to them with strong bipartisan support.

Because of the foresight of a century ago, we can enjoy the White Mountain National Forest forever. Current-use legislation passed more than a generation ago has protected untold thousands of acres of forest and field.

Unfortunately, we cannot claim that in Concord today we have elected leaders with similar conviction who stand up and fight for our state’s environmental future.

When it comes to the environment today there is a disconnect between the words in party platforms and the actions of our lawmakers in Concord. Some legislators are dismissive of environmental protection. Where is the accountability? Only voters may demand from their elected representatives the evidence that demonstrates action and leadership befitting their party platform positions.

Some say we environmentalists are our worst enemy, for we are always providing information about “things” — heavy metals, biodiversity, habitat — but reluctant to jump in the fray. Yet from a legislator’s point of view, personal relationships and values trump information every time.

Perhaps the only thing that trumps relationships and values is politics; thus the desire to get elected or get re-elected drives policy, including decisions on environmental protection.

We expect evidence of leadership in Concord. Environmental protection is an issue vital to our well-being, to our economy and to our future. The parties’ environmental platforms may be acceptable, but who is embracing the issues and reaching for solutions that will matter years from now? Which lawmakers or candidates

represent the cream of the crop? Who are the “dirty dozen”? The answers will be important to New Hampshire voters.

Answers to the preamble quiz: A: Taken from the Democratic platform. B: Taken from the Republican platform.

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