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Benson: It's not easy being 'green'

Collin Manning -- State House Notebook -- July 4, 2004

As Gov. Craig Benson was being called a hypocrite by Senate Minority Leader Sylvia Larsen for chastising former Attorney General Peter Heed when his own record on women is not spotless, the governor was getting punched in the gut on another issue — the environment.

A nonpartisan group called the Granite State Conservation Alliance gave Benson an overall grade of "C-" on its environmental report card Monday. While Benson, and his associates' record on women was being rehashed, the alliance quietly released its report.

The latter is what really drew the ire of Benson, who has already received several attacks from Democrats for not being very "green."

The group listed several areas where it felt Benson dropped the ball, or failed to even acknowledge an issue. They also, however, gave Benson credit for environmental initiatives including Heed's decision to sue big oil over MtBE contamination, as well as the nominations of Fish and Game Director Lee Perry and Department of Resources and Economic Development Commissioner Sean O'Kane. The alliance called the two advocates for conservation. After hearing the grade, Benson lashed out, calling the report "a clear political tool." Posted on the governor's Web site at www.nh.gov, the governor's office posted a point-by-point retort to the alliance's report card.

The alliance gave Benson a "D" on transportation, stating, "The Governor refused to acquire a critical link of railroad right-of-way despite the urgings of the Department of Transportation." Benson's office responds to the allegation by stating, "The report claims the Governor refused to acquire a critical link of railroad right-of-way in Salem. When at the time the report was released that acquisition had been approved by G & C (governor and Executive Council)."

Not true, says David Fink, executive vice president of Guilford Transportation, the company which owns most of the rail property in the state. Fink said while the state was supposed to purchase the property, Benson continually pulled the agenda item from the Executive Council agenda.

"My understanding is the governor doesn't want to purchase any more railroad property which is fine with us, just don't string us along. The state's been saying they want this for a year and now they don't want it. This is no way to be treated," Fink said. "What the governor's Web site said is just not true."

In fact, Guilford has taken Benson to federal court accusing him of costly delays regarding the sale of rail property. Roger Stephenson, a board member of the alliance, said he was surprised to see the governor's office respond so vehemently to the report and insisted the group is nonpartisan.

"This really struck a nerve with the governor and has taken on a life of its own," Stephenson said. "When I read the response from the governor I thought we got it wrong, but I checked with David Fink. We were right and the governor was wrong."

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