

Environmental reputation is only that

By Vic Maerki

The word is finally beginning to get out that Vermont's environmental reputation is a lot better than its environmental performance.

This, of course, has been true for a long time, despite the state's admirable efforts at land use control and its expressed concern for environmental values.

Vermonters ought to remind themselves that the state established much of its modern environmental reputation about two decades ago with passage of billboard controls, a bottle deposit law and the Act 250 land use law.

Vermont is still above average in its environmental efforts but, except for a recent flurry of legislation that has yet to show results, the state has not had much success in dealing with nagging threats to the environment.

Despite as lot of political noise and breast-beating, Vermont remains without a solid strategy or workable plan to handle either the nuclear waste or the ordinary garbage generated in the state.

The record of state and local government participation in the cleanup of the state's two modest Superfund waste sites is dismal, at best.

Once over lightly



Evidence surfacing in Montpelier these days suggests the state agency in charge of environmental protection is a toothless tiger, weakened by declining federal aid and without much new support from the state treasury. We have been passing laws, but failing to provide the money to enforce them.

It is not just at the state level that Vermont is coming up short in protecting the environment.

Burlington, the state's biggest and richest city, has sat on its hands while its air, water and soil have been degraded as a matter of municipal policy and neglect.

The disgraceful pollution of Lake Champlain by the antiquated Burlington sewage collection and treatment system is in the process of being corrected — but only after the beaches had to be closed to protect the health of people.

The city continues to operate a municipal dump that, if not illegal, is offensive — and its best

long-term solution seems to be an effort to relocate the problem to Lamoille County.

Burlington's air quality was insulted for years by the old lake-front municipal generating station. The new city power plant in the Intervale is a blight on the scenery, as well as a daily nuisance to downwind residents of the Old North End.

The excuses for all this that have been made by the political leaders of the state and the city for the last two decades have been (1) the technology doesn't exist to control the pollution, or (2) it costs too much to do the job.

Those, of course, are the same lame excuses that we have been hearing for years from polluting industries — the kinds of excuses that have been regularly rejected by politicians in their quest for environmental votes.

All of this is particularly bad news these days because one of the most enduring legacies of Ronald Reagan has been the shift to state and local governments of the burden of such chores as protecting the environment.

When the nation's environmental conscience was reawakened more than two decades ago, Vermont was in relatively good shape because the accident of geography and economic development had

left the state less polluted than many other parts of the nation.

But, the rush of urban refugees to Vermont and the consequences of that migration have since increased the contamination of the state's air, water, soil and landscape.

For the most part, Vermont's leaders have responded with lofty speeches and ambitious legislation. That may be good politics, but it falls short of being good government.

There is a new awareness of our shortcomings developing in Montpelier and an interesting election campaign getting started in Burlington.

Which means that a seasoned governor of Vermont and a rookie mayor of Burlington will have the opportunity to produce the kind of environmental leadership and action Vermont has been bragging about for the last 20 years.

Vic Maerki has been an observer of the Vermont political scene for more than 30 years, first as a newspaper reporter and then as an aide to recently retired Sen. Robert Stafford.

Marki - environmental results lagging

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