

vt.Buzz ~ a political blog

Political notes from Free Press staff writers Terri Hallenbeck, Sam Hemingway and Nancy Remsen
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Idle chat

The Vermont Senate was voting this morning on a bill that would require schools to establish a bus idling policy by 2008. The legislation also says that the Education Department should write a model policy.

What with all the focus on global warming this legislative session, restrictions on where, when and whether buses may idle, which have been brewing in both the House and Senate for several years, have about as good a chance as they ever have had.

When this bill got its airing on the Senate floor, however, its flaws began to show.

Sen. Dick Mazza, D-Chittenden/Grand Isle, questioned why the state and the local boards should be making separate policies. Why the duplication?

Sen. Bobby Starr, D-Essex/Orleans, responded: "I believe we're all great believers in local control." The idea, he said, is to simply encourage schools to form a policy, but not tell them what that policy has to be.

"We all want to do something for cleaner air," Mazza said, "but this does nothing to do that."

Heads around the room started shaking, signals were being flashed in Morse code. Senate President Pro Tempore Peter Shumlin, D-Windham, rose to say that any idling bill would eventually become part of a larger climate change bill. As in, don't worry, this exact bill is going nowhere anyway.

That, apparently, allowed many senators to vote for it, even if they wanted something stronger, lest they be accused later of favoring idling. The bill passed 25-4. Mazza, Sens. Alice Nitka, Hull Maynard and George Coppenrath opposed.

Perhaps the oddest part of the little charade was a comment from Sen. Dick Sears, D-Bennington. "I hope eventually to do away with school buses," he said. That should be interesting legislation.

- Terri Hallenbeck