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Dostis leaving Legislature

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MONTPELIER - Rep. Robert **Dostis**, the Waterbury Democrat who has been in the middle of the debate on energy issues, from the future of the Vermont Yankee nuclear plant to the licensing of wind towers, will not return to the Statehouse next year. **Dostis** has been a lawmaker since 2000 and chairman of the House Natural Resource and Energy Committee for four years. But it is time to step back from the amount of time and energy being an active legislator requires, said **Dostis**, who is also the executive director of the Vermont Campaign to End Childhood Hunger.

"The bottom line is that as a chairman, the amount of responsibility I have and the amount of hours I have to put in have significantly increased," **Dostis** said. When he first ran for office, another lawmaker warned him that the more years he spent in the post, the more time and work it would require of him.

"I have learned that to be absolutely true," **Dostis** said. "It became too much to manage my increasing responsibilities as a legislator and to run a growing organization."

"Before I burn out, which would really be a disservice to the people who elected me, I think it is an appropriate time to step down," he said.

Dostis' committee became well known in Montpelier for writing - and often unanimously approving - legislation on the complex issues around energy as the state begins to consider if Vermont Yankee should keep operating and whether to sign new contracts with Hydro-Quebec.

Two of the major pieces of energy legislation the committee worked on this year - establishing the dimensions of an inspection of Yankee's reliability, and an energy and global warming bill - passed not only the Natural Resources and Energy Committee, but the full House by unanimous votes.

The Democratically controlled Legislature has found itself at odds with the administration of Gov. James Douglas, a Republican, over energy issues several times in recent years.

"Whenever I went into his committee I always felt I would be treated fairly and be heard," said Deputy Commissioner Richard Smith. "His primary concern is what is good for Vermont and what is the right answer, not what is politically expedient at that moment."

The result of that consensus approach to lawmaking meant "he could move complex legislation forward," Smith said.

It has also meant that some advocates - and some lawmakers - have felt **Dostis** did not push hard enough for legislation that was far-reaching.

"The energy issues we face in Vermont require bold leadership beyond what he was able to do, given that he had to work with the Douglas administration," said James Moore of the Vermont Public Interest Research Group. "We need solutions that match the severity of the problems we face. We have a solid foundation in Vermont to build on. Now we have to get to work. Chairman **Dostis** deserves credit for some of that foundation."

Dostis is aware of the criticism of his leadership on the energy committee.

"For some, the bills we passed went too far, and for some, they didn't go far enough," he said. "That is why we were able to find consensus. We crafted good legislation and people were willing to go outside their comfort zones."

In the end, his committee has helped set a new course on energy policy in the state, one based on encouraging in-state renewable energy generation, **Dostis** said.

Over several years and several bills the committee has written legislation expanding net metering - allowing the owner of a small-scale renewable power plant to "sell" power back to its utility offsetting the cost of its electricity. Now neighborhoods and other groups can pool money to build group net metering systems larger than were allowed.

The committee also helped establish standards for how much renewable energy utilities buy, created a clean energy development fund (largely with money from Vermont Yankee), and established economic and tax incentives for renewable projects.

Another member of the House committee, Rep. Tony Klein, D-East Montpelier, worked closely with **Dostis**, advocating for what might be considered the more radical positions while the chairman searched for the middle. Klein said **Dostis** did the job well.

"The result of it was he was able to keep the Republicans on our committee engaged and constructive members of the committee," Klein said. "I think he was a brilliant strategist and I don't think people give him enough credit for that."

"I think it is a great loss for Waterbury, I think it is a great loss for the Statehouse, and I think it is a great loss for the state of Vermont," Klein said.

Last year's session, when lawmakers passed a controversial bill taxing the owners of the Vermont Yankee plant and using the money to fund a heating fuel efficiency program only to see it vetoed, was a difficult one, **Dostis** said.

"Having worked so hard on an energy bill that ultimately ended up getting vetoed was, for me, really disheartening," he said. "I believed we could have done something different to find consensus and gotten a bill passed into law. That is always my goal."

The Legislature and Douglas agreed to a new version of the measure this year that created the efficiency program without the Yankee tax.

Despite being a supporter of the controversial civil unions bill, **Dostis** was elected in 2000, the year a backlash against that new law helped Republicans temporarily regain a majority in the House.

"I knocked on every door twice. Some doors three times," **Dostis** said. The day after winning a Democratic primary, he began making the rounds of doors in his district again, **Dostis** recalled Wednesday.

Like many in the citizen Legislature, **Dostis** has worked on different sides of the lawmaking process.

As the head of an anti-hunger advocacy group, **Dostis** helped get two pieces of legislation approved that have - he hopes - reduced the number of children in the state who do not get adequate nutrition.

The first required that school districts participate in the federal free and reduced breakfast and lunch program unless they voted to opt out. The percentage of districts that offer the program has increased from about 85 percent to roughly 95 percent over the last several years.

Second, the Legislature this year passed a program making breakfast free for all students whose families are in poverty. That means that

those kids whose families qualified for reduced price breakfasts do not have to contribute to the cost of the meal, which will result in about 7,000 more Vermont children being in the program, **Dostis** said.

The Legislature appropriated about \$170,000 for the state's portion of the additional expense and will get \$1.05 in federal money for every 30 cents of state funds, **Dostis** said.

"We get more money into our economy and kids get full stomachs," he said.

Citizen lawmakers bring their own experiences to the job. He brought the knowledge of "knowing what it feels like to sit in the classroom with an empty stomach," said **Dostis**, 49.

Now a Vermonter, the head of a non-profit and - at least for a few more months - a lawmaker, **Dostis** grew up far away in a Brooklyn, N.Y. housing project. His life has changed, but he hasn't forgotten, he said.

"What I bring is my experience as a kid, first in foster care, then in a neighborhood where drugs and violence and poverty was pervasive," **Dostis** said. Unlike many, "I was able to get out."

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