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A Christmas Wish List

By Sarwar A. Kashmeri

For the Valley News

During the height of the Cold War, a Washington, D.C., radio reporter decided to telephone a number of ambassadors to ask them what they would like for Christmas. Ambassador after ambassador replied with solemn wishes: peace on earth, happiness for all the workers of the world, or sanity in American-Soviet dealings. Then the reporter got to the British ambassador, who said softly, "I'd like a box of milk chocolates please."

Taking a cue from this enterprising reporter, I decided to poll a number of the Upper Valley's business and nonprofit leaders to ask them what their Christmas wish list would be were they able to speak directly to their governor and legislature. Here is what they said. (The opinions are those of the individuals, and do not necessarily reflect the views of their organizations.)

Charles Peterson, the thoughtful president of First Community Savings Bank in Woodstock, has long been concerned about education reform. He would like the state to "appoint a summer study group to assess best practices in Vermont's public education administration -- and bring recommendations to the state's education committees in 2007 regarding rationalizing the structure of public education in order to improve results and control costs," he told me.

Len Cadwallader is executive director of Vital Communities, one of the Upper Valley's best-known nonprofit think tanks. "We've got traffic problems that cause lost productivity and are costly for each town to mitigate," he told me.

"My wish: Merge the three regional planning commissions and make their first order of business the creation of a regional transit authority. Then give this new transit authority \$4 million to buy buses, build and expand park-and-ride lots, and coordinate the schedules of the existing public and private bus companies. The investment would have a tenfold payback, and be a model for other commuter-sheds."

Douglas Loudon runs Loudon Investment Management in West Lebanon and also is chairman of the board of trustees of the American Precision Museum in Windsor. With an eagle eye on tax issues in Vermont and New Hampshire, he observes that the growth of government seems inexorable and inevitable at all levels as programs -- however well-justified -- never seem to be eliminated while new ones are regularly added.

Loudon's wish: "I would like to see both states adopt sunset legislation for new and old spending programs. Programs not specifically and individually renewed would automatically be discontinued and dismantled. A line-item veto for each governor would help the process along and also fix responsibility for overspending."

Timken Aerospace is one of the Upper Valley's largest employers and has ambitious growth plans. Its hard-charging CEO, James Menning, came up with three wishes that, while directed to Gov. John Lynch of New Hampshire, appear equally relevant to Vermont.

Menning is not sure the governor realizes there are pockets of strong industrial growth occurring in New Hampshire, despite some very difficult environmental factors that companies are dealing with. "A major concern is the lack of vocational, technical or polytechnic training in the Upper Valley to support sustained industrial growth," he said. Menning's first wish is to "begin to correct this deficit by making changes to the state's education system, including setting and achieving math and science standards to world-class levels in every school system in the state." Menning said he would look at the German, Japanese or Singapore systems for guidance.

His second wish concerns affordable housing, "a constant problem for Timken." He notes that affordable housing "and housing growth in general, seem to be an issue in virtually every town in the region. Yet guidance or assistance from New Hampshire to help resolve this has not been visible."

Third: Manufacturers use one-third of the nation's energy and, Menning says, "companies and citizens would benefit from a fully deregulated electricity supply base. It will foster competition among providers and serve as an incentive to generate electricity using multiple methods to reduce dependency on any one fuel, reduce costs, and control spikes in pricing."

James Sturm, the gifted entrepreneur who founded the Center for Cartoon Studies in White River Junction, says he has already received his Christmas presents. "The wonderful thing about living in Vermont is that you do get to speak to the governor and state legislators. I'd asked the state legislators for some funds to fix up the Colodny building on South Main Street to help start a cartooning school. They said yes. Wish granted!"

This is the first academic year for the CCS, with students from all over the country and Europe. Vermont can get pretty cold in the winter, so Sturm asked Gov. Jim Douglas if he could find a way to send the students to some place warm for their spring break. Douglas didn't hesitate in his reply: " 'Consider it done,' " Sturm quoted the governor with a wink, " 'as long as I go with you.' How great is this state?"

"My personal wish is threefold," said Kevin Peterson, executive director of the Upper Valley Region, New Hampshire Charitable Foundation. First, "a brand-new, streamlined and equitable taxation system." Every year, all Peterson finds under the tree is "a cobbled together contraption that relies on an unfairly distributed grab bag of taxes and fees, and has created a 'structural deficit' that is a biennial problem." Peterson's second wish is "for our leaders to promote the duty, honor and value of investing in New Hampshire through that new tax system, because paying our fair share should be viewed as a form of civic engagement and positive investment in our state and its citizens and communities."

As a stocking stuffer, he would like a package that "provides greater and more

consistent financial support for state and regional land-use planning. Regional planning commissions offer invaluable technical assistance, support, and regional perspective to local planners, selectboards and conservation commissions, but they are grossly underfunded.”

Let me take this opportunity to wish each and every one of you the happiest of Eid, Hanukah, Divali, Christmas, or whatever holiday you choose to celebrate this wonderful time of year. As for me, I'd love a bowl of maple walnut ice cream with a healthy dose of dark amber Vermont maple syrup on it, please.

Sarwar A. Kashmeri of Reading, Vt., advises corporations on communications and marketing strategy and is a fellow of the Foreign Policy Association. This twice-monthly column explores the Upper Valley's “business climate,” focusing on the issues and conditions affecting the region's economic health. Kashmeri can be reached at skashmeri@aol.com.

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