

Hartford Courant.

Scandal Aside, It's Shady Business As Usual At Capitol

March 17, 2004

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Columnist

Yes, Connecticut, there's stuff happening at the Capitol that isn't related to impeachment, judges in trouble, ethics slapdowns, sweetheart deals and alleged McCarthyist witch hunts.

Peel away the veneer of the biggest government scandal to hit this state, and it's business as usual. This year, as always, a budget will be approved, hundreds of laws will be enacted and special interests will throw their weight around, scoring the occasional victory when their opponents' guard is down.

For powerful interests and their lobbyists (read: big givers to campaigns), the General Law Committee has always been a hospitable venue. This year, General Law must have seemed an especially inviting place, with the attention of its House chairman, John Wayne Fox, having been diverted to impeachment-related duties.

So, why not launch a sneak attack on two laws that are anathema to the beverage and tobacco industries and let the chips fall where they may? That's just what happened.

Lobbyists found legislators receptive to sponsoring a bill in General Law that would have repealed the state's highly successful, 26-year-old bottle redemption law, and another that would have struck down the imminent ban on smoking in bars and small restaurants.

Never mind that the redemption bill rightfully belongs in the Environment Committee and the smoking bill in Public Health. The pro-industry forces knew the repeal measures stood little chance in those committees, so they mounted rear-guard actions.

In the case of the tobacco proposal, the repeal brigade came close, but no cigar. The ban, which goes into effect April 1, was narrowly affirmed by General Law after Senate President Pro Tem Kevin B. Sullivan and House Speaker Moira K. Lyons intervened to stop potential backsliding.

"Moira, in particular, kept her foot on the accelerator," said a lawmaker with inside knowledge of the situation.

Lyons may need to keep the pedal to the metal for a few more weeks. Despite the seeming finality of the vote, this is the Connecticut General Assembly, where nothing is dead until the gavel bangs down at midnight on the last day of the session. Thus, anti-smoking crusaders are bracing for a last-ditch assault, probably as a stealth floor amendment.

Such a move could backfire, however. Forcing lawmakers to again debate the controversial bar ban, which passed last year as part of the smoke-free law covering most eating and drinking establishments, will only breed resentment, says Sen. Christopher Murphy, co-chairman of the Public Health Committee.

Besides, Murphy and others say, predictions by tavern owners of declining patronage and economic ruin are overblown. In study after study, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has found that smoke-free workplace laws haven't hurt business. That's been true in El Paso, Texas, New York City and Delaware. In California, sales and employment in bars and restaurants climbed after the adoption of its first-in-the-nation statewide smoking ban.

"In these very complex times, a few issues rise to the level of being very simple," said Baker Salisbury, director of public health in East Hartford, at a recent press conference. "Of these, only one or two are no-brainers. [Smoke-free workplaces] is one of them."

Another no-brainer is the state's bottle redemption law, which has rid the landscape of tons of trash, created 300 trucking jobs and resulted in 1.1 billion beverage containers being returned for a nickel apiece each year for recycling. Environmentalists would like to see a good law made better by expanding it to include non-carbonated beverages such as bottled water, single-serve juices and sports drinks. It's estimated that 515 million containers are sold in Connecticut annually.

But foes - led by grocery stores, beer wholesalers and soft drink distributors - say expansion of the nickel deposit law would lead to nightmarish administrative and bottle-sorting problems. They want the law wiped off the books and replaced with mandatory curbside recycling, in which municipalities instead of distributors and retailers would bear the financial burden.

Unlike with the smoking ban, the two opposing sides have given up, conceding that neither the repeal nor the expansion bill is likely to pass. They've agreed to renew the fight next year. Under the gold dome, there's always a next year.

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