

NH politicians had much to be thankful for in 2013

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We're all stuffed with holiday food, embarrassed by the gifts heaped upon us and picking up the pieces of stressed family budgets.

For some in politics, 2013 is a year they would just as soon forget; others wish it could never end; and for most, it was a year of success, surprise, stability and stalemate.

Let's review what some of our prominent figures in New Hampshire politics have to be thankful about:

Gov. Maggie Hassan: She's thankful New Hampshire lawmakers listened, and blinked on their plan to let patients and caregivers grow their own medical marijuana.

This may some day become the law of the land, but Hassan's blocking of it kept alive the likelihood she has solid law enforcement backing for her re-election bid.

U.S. Sen. Kelly Ayotte, R-N.H.: She's thankful West Virginia Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin is right, and his gun control legislation likely won't return to Capitol Hill next year. Ayotte took a beating in the polls among New Hampshire Independent voters by opposing the bill closing the so-called gun show loophole for firearm sales.

U.S. Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, D-N.H.: She's thankful to have former U.S. Sen. Bob Smith returning to the stage. Watch the wily Democratic incumbent scold the GOP establishment for tossing Smith aside while he asks GOP primary voters to forget his third-party run for president, endorsement of 2004 Democratic nominee John Kerry and 10-year exodus to Florida, where he started and stopped two U.S. Senate campaigns.

U.S. Rep. Annie Kuster, D-N.H.: She's thankful her red-faced meltdown at the New Hampshire Jewish Federation event about the tragedy in Benghazi happened in December of a nonelection year and not when the bright lights of her re-election campaign will be burning in 2014.

U.S. Rep. Carol Shea-Porter, D-N.H.: She's thankful the man who first knocked her out of office, former Congressman Frank Guinta, has to navigate a ticklish primary against Dan Innis, an innkeeper, former University of New Hampshire business school dean and openly gay Republican.

Guinta will win this race, but it may only come after a few uncomfortable moments.

House Speaker Terie Norelli, D-Portsmouth: She has to be thankful about a successful run and return to take the gavel. Family comes first for this Portsmouth Democrat, whose husband dealt with the loss of a parent and a sister within a 48-hour period.

Norelli hasn't said whether she'll seek a fourth term as House leader after the 2014 election. If not, she surely would go out on top.

Senate President Chuck Morse, R-Salem: He's thankful his predecessor, Peter Bragdon, had the good judgment to change his mind and step down from the rostrum after taking the \$180,000-a-year job as head of the former Local Government Center.

Scott Brown: He's thankful to have moved to a state where heavyweights in his political party got terminally cold feet, allowing Brown to register at Rye Town Hall, get his "Live Free or Die" license plate and instantly become the front-runner for a U.S. Senate nomination.

Nashua Mayor Donnalee Lozeau: She's most thankful that 2013 will have come and gone, a lost haze marked by an unusual (to say the least) undercover police investigation of her and her husband, David.

Manchester Mayor Ted Gatsas: He's thankful to have survived a surprisingly strong test from Alderman Patrick Arnold; party insiders are already grooming him to take a run at Sen. David Boutin, R-Hooksett, in 2014.

His wife, Kathleen Kelley, ran against Boutin in 2012.

Gatsas is also thankful that despite rampant speculation to the contrary, he won't be a candidate for governor or U.S. Senate in 2014. Privately, he believes Democrats Shaheen and Hassan are likely to win.

Concord Mayor Jim Bouley: The savvy lobbyist is thankful to keep getting cream puff opponents every two years when his name is on the ballot. The popular Democrat will be running Concord as long as he has a mind to keep doing it.

Salem GOP state Rep. Marilinda Garcia: She's thankful the national and state GOP just came out of an election in which women and minority voters left them in droves. She suddenly becomes an American phenomenon, a young, Hispanic Republican woman running for Congress.

Former Nashua GOP state Sen. Gary Lambert: He's thankful for good friends, such as former House Majority Leader Peter Silva, who built an impressive network for his GOP 2nd District nomination test versus Garcia.

Are you selling Lambert short? Remember, this is the guy who won a Nashua-based state Senate seat that hadn't gone Republican in more than 90 years.

Democratic council contender Michael Cryans: This Hanover Democrat is grateful the late Councilor Ray Burton had endorsed his re-election as Grafton County commissioner in 2012. He's also thankful to have been born, taught school and lived more than three decades in Littleton, the heart of the North Country, which could decide this race.

Republican council hopeful Chris Boothby: He has to be thankful to have friends in high places. Senate Majority Leader Jeb Bradley, Ways and Means Chairman Bob Odell and Finance Chairman Jeanie Forrester abandoned a former colleague, ex-Sen. Joe Kenney, to endorse Boothby in a three-way primary that GOP voters will decide on Jan. 21

Call of the riled

If only that phone book could talk.

Kitty-corner from the Statehouse press room, the phone room was a sanctuary where governors, presidential candidates, legislative leaders and ambassadors ran to get a few minutes of quiet during times of stress.

I recall a Republican White House hopeful, who wasn't ready to answer questions from trailing press, ducking in there to look like he was placing a telephone call.

Verizon had taken out the coin-operated phone years before.

Later, it remained a place where lobbyists went to pore over an amendment they just had snagged from a friendly legislator or to have a cellphone conversation without competing ears listening in.

At long last, Statehouse maintenance men removed the relic on Christmas Eve.

Ethics acrobatics

The rank and file in the New Hampshire House of Representatives are having a tough time going cyber with their ethics filings.

Every year, all lawmakers have to fill out financial disclosure forms that are among the weakest in the country. The forms merely require they identify any source of income in excess of \$10,000 a year.

Executive Administrator Rich Lambert, with the Legislative Ethics Committee, managed a change long sought by ethics reformers, placing the forms online so that lawmakers could file electronically.

Here were the results from the 397 current House members: Seven had gone online to try to sign them, and only two succeeded.

All those who make the attempt have to download a new version of Adobe Acrobat. Then a warning screen comes on that this could damage their settings, the kind of disclaimer that has to be shown but almost never happens to any user..

You get the idea. Nervous or privacy paranoid lawmakers then cancel the transaction or never start one in the first place.

Lure of the office

All of a sudden, Manchester Republican John Stephen has become the default candidate for governor.

As so many others before him have never signed up or aborted runs, many prominent Republicans are telling Stephen they're desperate to have him in the race against Hassan.

Stephen is spending the holiday season trying to convince his family and himself that it's the right race for him to enter.

Meanwhile, Bradley, R-Wolfeboro, told associates he has had no second thoughts since rejecting a move for higher office.

Serious health problems for his mother and sister prompted Bradley to pass on what would have been instant frontrunner status had he decided to run for governor or the U.S. Senate.

Bradley remains comfortable about making the right call.

Topic that won't go away

When the special session came and went without utter collapse over expanding Medicaid, that pretty much killed the topic entering an election-year session both sides expect to be partisan, right?

Not so fast.

Discussions among senators from both political parties have resumed, including one meeting at the Laconia auto dealership of Democratic Sen. Andy Hosmer.

Josiah Bartlett Center President Charles Arlinghaus is among those conservative opponents who fear that a compromise will come about in 2014.

"When the session ended, they were so close; I was calling both plans Tweedledee Dumb and Tweedledumb Dee, which wasn't well-liked by the Senate Republican leadership," said Arlinghaus, a minority on the Medicaid expansion commission who opposed the final report.

Indeed, the big split was over the timeline for when those newly eligible for Medicaid would have to buy coverage on the exchange under the Affordable Care Act.

Well, developments last week could go a long way toward taking care of that.

Hassan had wanted assurances that the new clients have at least three insurance options.

We have Minuteman Health, which just got a \$67 million loan to set up a nonprofit so it can sell insurance on the exchange in New Hampshire in 2015.

Harvard Pilgrim Health Care hasn't totally squelched its earlier report that it would have interest in the market.

Then we have the internal pressure being applied to all three managed care companies making big money by offering HMO coverage to the 130,000 already on Medicaid.

Translation: It's looking like that three pigs in a blanket may be ready to come out of the oven when Hassan would want them to in 2015.

"This by no means is done, but there is the opportunity for a bipartisan compromise on Medicaid expansion early on in the 2014 session," Bradley said last week.

Keep your eyes peeled for a new and improved Medicaid plan to emerge during the opening month of the next legislative session.

Budgetary concerns

Whether accurate or not, New Hampshire Democrats believe Ayotte stepped in it by vowing to vote against the new budget agreement earlier this month.

Ayotte got a lot of good street cred on Capitol Hill by crusading against the government shutdown efforts of Texas Sen. Ted Cruz. Now she gets out against the bipartisan deal that has the blessing of House Speaker John Boehner before GOP figures such as Arizona Sen. John McCain, an Ayotte mentor, goes for it, along with Sen. Susan Collins.

Ayotte said the deal didn't go far enough on the deficit and debt, and she also was critical of the significant cuts in benefits for military retirees.

Conservative groups such as Americans for Prosperity, the Club for Growth and the Cato Institute applauded Ayotte for standing on principle.

Ayotte's camp made sure a statement from the Veterans of Foreign Wars got out that thanked people like the New Hampshire Republican for not accepting military benefit cuts.

They hosted a rally for Ayotte in Merrimack.

But some industry sources disagree, such as this statement from Aerospace Industries Association President and CEO Marion Blakey.

"While a broader budget deal that would have eliminated sequestration altogether would have been ideal, we recognize the significant efforts that went into reaching this agreement for the next two years," Blakey said.

Later, he noted the defense industry wanted something to pass.

"Furthermore, it is very important that Congress pass the National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2014 before they depart for the holiday recess," Blakey said. "There are a number of critical items which will impact our service members and their readiness to ensure our national security."

Ayotte's staff points out she was the only one to vote against sequestration cuts in 2011 and has introduced legislation to replace defense and non-defense cuts for one year with alternative savings, including a cut through attrition of the federal workforce.

And she has introduced legislation to replace non-defense and defense sequestration for one year with alternative savings (requiring a reduction in the federal workforce through attrition and the continuation of a pay freeze for federal employees and members of Congress. This offset was recommended by the president's fiscal commission).

Last week, after the budget deal passed, Ayotte put in her bill to restore the military benefits cut.

One silver lining for Ayotte was right after the budget vote, the Senate adopted the Defense Authorization Bill with Ayotte's support. The measure has numerous spending provisions for New Hampshire-based defense partners from both of its senators.

No way out of this one

It wasn't just partisan Republicans who were panning the performance of 2nd District Congresswoman Kuster, who went all deer in the headlights at a planted GOP question about Benghazi in Manchester recently.

Kuster's assertion that "Libya is not in the Middle East" when she was before the Jewish Federation of New Hampshire to discuss her recent trip to Israel brought her an avalanche of assaults from the right.

But here's how Manchester Democratic Sen. Lou D'Allesandro summed it up, first during Jack Heath's talk show on WGIR-AM and later during an interview with The Sunday Telegraph.

"Annie is a smart woman, and she's got to know how stupid she sounded trying to talk her way out of what was a sucker punch," D'Allesandro said.

"I've fallen victim to those, too. I know enough now to just say I don't know, and she needs to learn to do the same thing."

Kuster's team was well aware they had taken on mortar fire, and were in full damage control by week's end.

"Like all Americans, I was horrified by the tragic attack on our embassy in Benghazi that killed four patriotic Americans," Kuster said in a statement. "Our focus must remain on finding those responsible, bringing them to justice and taking every necessary step to prevent an attack like this from ever happening again."