

Conservation Scorecard Details Voting Records

The General Assembly sounds like an echo chamber, figuratively at least, wherein state lawmakers repeatedly sound familiar refrains.

But the Senate side of the Legislature is anything but an echo chamber, literally at least, as the Senate hardly ever takes roll-call votes. Instead, the Senate decides the fate of most legislation by voice vote.

For example, the Senate did not take a roll-call vote on any environmental bills in the two-year legislative session that ended in June, according to Conservation Voters of South Carolina.

That's why senators are not ranked in

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the latest legislative scorecard compiled by Conservation Voters, a statewide nonprofit that says it is working to establish "a bipartisan conservation majority" in the General Assembly by 2010. "This scorecard enables [South Carolinians] to see if their legislators are in step with traditional conservation values," Jenks Mikell, chairman of the group's board, says in a Sept. 10 news release accompanying the scorecard.

The tabulation says the biggest victories in the past session included full funding of the Conservation Bank, a state program to buy and preserve undeveloped land; reform of the S.C. Department of Transportation, which included requiring the agency to objectively analyze and prioritize road projects to remove political favoritism from the process; and banning river shacks, or makeshift structures, from public water bodies.

Among House members, four received the lowest score, 14 out of 100: Tracy Edge, R-Horry; Fletcher Smith, D-Greenville; Jim Stewart, R-Aiken; and Bob Walker, R-Spartanburg.

Other noteworthy points in the scorecard: 16 House members — nine Democrats and seven Republicans — made the 100 percent "honor roll"; the honor roll members include five Richland County lawmakers: Democrats Chris Hart, John Scott and James Smith and Republicans Nathan Ballentine and Bill Cotty; the average House score improved 18 points over the previous scorecard, from 49 to 67; 35 Democrats and 33 Republicans were above average; Democrats averaged a 74 and Republicans averaged a 63.

"This next session will determine how South Carolina manages its precious waters for health, recreation and growth," Conservation Voters director Ann Timberlake says in the release.

To the end, the group lists requiring a permit to withdraw water from a lake or other surface water body as the most important unfinished business in the Legislature.

Two state environmental organizations laud the scorecard but qualify their opinions by saying that its effectiveness is limited by the lack of roll-call Senate votes.

"It certainly is imperfect," South Carolina Sierra Club director John Ramsburgh says. But Ramsburgh says the scorecard nonetheless functions as a legitimate, fair tool to evaluate the conservation voting records of many legislators.

Says Nancy Fitzer, education director of Upstate Forever, "I give the scorecard an A."

One weakness of it, Fitzer says, stems from the fact that final votes on bills do not always reflect sometimes contentious debate and compromise that preceded the finished legislative product. In that way, she says, "There may be a little bit of grade inflation in the House."

Despite the limitations of the scorecard, it seems to be on the minds of the honorables. "Throughout the legislative session, we were asked, 'Will this be a scorecard vote?' or, 'How will this affect my score?'" Timberlake says. — EW

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