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Common Cause Grades For Lawmakers Hit New Low

By Katherine Gregg

PROVIDENCE — Report cards are in for state lawmakers.

And their grades fell to “an all-time low” during the 2009-10 General Assembly session, according to the latest of the annual “Legislative Scorecards” issued by the citizens-advocacy group Common Cause.

“The average for state senators sank to 51 percent, while the average for members of the House was a dismal 48 percent,” said John Marion, executive director of the Rhode Island chapter of the national citizens’ group.

The scores were based on a number of key votes over the last two years on bills that Common Cause considered important, including a bill sponsored by House Speaker Gordon Fox to give state voters a chance, this November, to reinstate the jurisdiction the state Ethics Commission has had for decades over the legislators themselves, until it was stripped by the Rhode Island Supreme Court last year.

The House overwhelmingly approved the November ethics referendum. But despite its apparent support at the highest levels of power in the House, Senate leaders refused to allow it to come to the Senate floor for a vote.

While this was obviously a bill that Common Cause supported enthusiastically, the scorecard also reflects the lawmakers’ votes on bills — and amendments — that Common Cause opposed, such as the one introduced by Rep. Jon D. Brien, “on behalf of Secretary of State A. Ralph Mollis,” that would have required a photo identification to vote. This bill also passed the House, then died in the Senate.

In his explanation of why Common Cause took this vote into account, Marion wrote: “Common Cause opposes efforts to impose an identification requirement for voting. We feel it may be potentially discriminatory.”

The highest score in the House — 86 percent — went to Rep. Edith Ajello, D-Providence, the persistent sponsor of doomed bills favored by Common Cause, the Rhode Island League of Women Voters and other citizens group to strengthen the state’s Access to Public Records Act, and in the Senate, to independent Edward O’Neill of Lincoln, and Democrats Marc Cote of Woonsocket and Michael J. Pinga of West Warwick.

So how did the General Assembly’s leaders and upwardly mobile political aspirants score?

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Fox, the new House speaker, House Majority Leader Nicholas Mattiello, his top deputy, and House Finance Committee Chairman Steven Costantino, now running for mayor of Providence, each sided with Common Cause 52 percent of the time; House Minority Leader Robert Watson, 40 percent.

Former House Majority Whip Peter Kilmartin, who is currently running for attorney general, was with Common Cause 45 percent of the time. Rep. David Segal, now running for Rhode Island's 1st Congressional District seat, was on the same side 63 percent of the time.

On the Senate side, Senate President M. Teresa Paiva Weed was with Common Cause 45 percent of the time, Senate Majority Leader Daniel Connors, 48 percent, and Senate Minority Leader Dennis Algieri, R-Westerly, 64 percent.

Marion hailed the passage during the 2009-10 legislative session of several "significant structural reforms to state government, including the creation of a school-funding formula, and changes to the tax structure."

But he said "the government reform agenda, unfortunately, took a back seat," and he cited the Senate refusal to "take up a Common Cause initiative to let the voters decide whether lawmakers should be subject to the jurisdiction of the states' Ethics Commission" as a prime example.

"We are disappointed in the scores for the General Assembly in 2009-2010," Marion said. "It was our hope that with new leadership in both chambers, the agenda for reform would move forward."

Instead, he said, the Assembly and governor "undermined Constitutional reforms enacted by voters," in three areas of particular concern to Common Cause: ethics, judicial selection and the separation-of-powers between the legislative and executive branches: "All have seen setbacks in recent years."

For the first time, Common Cause has built a website (www.commoncausescorecard.org) where viewers can search for the votes — and scores — of their legislators. "This website not only gives information about how legislators scored, but also provides details about the votes used to calculate the scores, and links for contacting members of the General Assembly," Marion said.