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POLITICS

Kuster's stunning move sets off a scramble

■ 2nd Congressional District representative's shocking announcement that she won't seek reelection this fall has Democrats and Republicans weighing their options.

By **Kevin Landrigan**
Union Leader Staff

U.S. Rep. Annie Kuster's unexpected announcement that she will not seek a seventh term this fall

set off a scramble in both political parties for New Hampshire's 2nd Congressional District seat, a safe haven for Democrats since Kuster unseated Republican Congressman Charlie Bass in 2012.

"As I look to the future, I am excited by the work and opportunities that lie ahead. We all have a role to play in standing up for what we believe in, advocating for a better future, and pursuing the change that we want to see. I always said I was not going to stay in Congress forever — I will not be seeking



ANNIE KUSTER

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Pig's in a blanket (of mud)



DAVID LANE/UNION LEADER

This pig in Goffstown doesn't seem to mind that it's back to mud season following the weekend snow and ice storm. More mud could be on the way with rain expected today and Friday.

CONCORD

1,000 housing units hinge on \$16M road

■ Fate of \$500M Monitor Way project being driven by negotiations with city over cost of infrastructure.

By **Michael Cousineau**
Union Leader Staff

CONCORD — Plans to build nearly 1,000 housing units in Concord hinge on funding for a new 1.5-mile road that could cost up to \$16 million to build, a developer said.

"We need to work out a development

agreement with the city on the construction of that road infrastructure that I was talking about," developer Kevin Lacasse said in an interview after addressing a housing conference Tuesday.

The city turned down one idea, he said, to pay 100% of the road — which would link Sewalls Falls Road and Merchants Way — through a tax increment

financing district, which is a defined area where property taxes can be designated for specific purposes.

Lacasse said he is working with city staff on a compromise to share the road costs, which are inflated by the expense of crossing two brooks.

"Everything is negotiable," he said.

The estimated \$500 million project, to be built on half of a 123-acre site bordering the Merrimack River south of Exit 17

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THE ENVIRONMENT

Bow coal power plant closing

■ Merrimack Station site set to become a renewable energy park after 2028 shutdown.

By **Jonathan Phelps**
Union Leader Staff

Merrimack Station, the last coal-fired power plant in New England and a long-time target of conservation groups, will close to make way for a "renewable energy park," company officials announced Wednesday.

Owner Granite Shore Power reached an agreement with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to cease using its coal-fired boilers by at least June 1, 2028, maybe even a year earlier, according to the agreement, which includes a similar plan for Schiller Station in Portsmouth.

The agreement ends litigation brought by the Conservation Law Foundation and the Sierra Club, according to the organizations.

New England will be the second "coal-free" region in the United States after the Pacific Northwest, according to Bloomberg Philanthropies, which has worked with the Sierra Club to eliminate 72% of coal-fired power plants in the U.S. since 2011.

The plant mostly runs in the winter, when natural gas prices are high.

Since 2019, 350 NH Action has called for the shutdown of the Bow plant through its "No Coal, No Gas" campaign. Multiple rallies have resulted in arrests.

Failed stack tests and at least one boiler not working had the group thinking change at the plant was imminent, said Rebecca Beaulieu, communications director for 350 NH. The group was unaware of the plans to invest in clean energy.

She said the efforts of all the groups "pushed them to stop wasting their time" on the coal-fired power plants.

"I'm glad there is finally a deadline to close by," Beaulieu said.

Granite Shore Power said it has long planned to end the use of coal, and the agreement will spur new economic growth for the region, though specific plans for its renewable efforts have yet to be released. A news release mentions "battery, solar and other clean energy facilities."

"From our earliest days as owners and operators, we have been crystal clear;

► See **Plant**, Page A8

TOTAL ECLIPSE

Upcoming solar spectacle is even 'bigger than the Super Bowl'

Bill Nye "the Science Guy" and astronomer Amy Mainzer watch totality in 2017 at a public viewing event put on by the National Park Service at Homestead National Park in Beatrice, Nebraska.



THE PLANETARY SOCIETY

■ With their eyes on the April sky, Americans are spending big in anticipation of the interstellar phenomenon.

By **Abha Bhattarai**
The Washington Post

For those hoping to catch a glimpse of the total solar eclipse in April, there's no shortage of options. Six Flags Over Texas is hosting a "Solar Coaster" viewing party. Holland America has a 22-day Solar Eclipse Cruise. And after filling up one path-of-totality flight, Delta Air Lines

has added a second, promising unadulterated views from "extra-large" windows.

But almost everything is sold out.

The total solar eclipse, which will be visible from more than a dozen states, is fueling a small spending boom across the nation. Hotels are booked, campgrounds are full and rental cars are nowhere to be found around the April 8

► **Totally in:** Granite Staters are fired up over the upcoming total solar eclipse • NH Weekend, B1

event. States including Arkansas and Indiana are expecting record-breaking travel and spending.

"This is likely going to be the single biggest tourism event we've ever had," said Michael Pakko, an economist at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, who is projecting a state-wide windfall of \$105 million. "Obviously, it's going to be a

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Today's Chuckle

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Housing

on Interstate 93, could take until 2030 to complete. It will include townhomes, condos and apartments.

A leading housing expert applauded the project.

"I thought that Kevin's development that he showed us today was really important by the fact that it had this mix of housing types," said Chris Herbert, executive director of the Joint

Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University.

The country, he said, needs more varieties of housing.

"We need to have more forms of smaller or cost-efficient housing," Herbert said at the conference.

Matt Walsh, Concord's deputy city manager-development, said the Monitor Way project had a prelimi-

nary design review consultation with the Planning Board last October.

"The project developers have not applied for any municipal development permits or approvals for the Monitor Way project," Walsh said in an email.

Lacasse said the best-case scenario would be for the first residents to move in by late 2025 or early 2026

into townhomes to be built and sold.

The project also will contain self-storage units, 151 units of workforce housing, condo units for sale and hundreds of market-rate apartments.

The various facets could be worked on simultaneously as each would attract "a different clientele," Lacasse said.

During Tuesday's conference, Lacasse outlined the project highlights.

The development has garnered public support, but those "with torches and pitchforks really come out" to oppose projects, he said.

Darren Winham, economic development director in Exeter, said he approached big area employers who provided let-

ters of support to the zoning board to get a large project approved.

Lacasse said his project would include about 2 miles of walking trails, bike paths and public river access, which currently doesn't exist along that section of the river.

"Going into it, we knew it was going to be a long project," he said.

Plant

while our power occasionally is still on during New England's warmest days and coldest nights, we were firmly committed to transitioning our facilities away from coal and into a newer, cleaner energy future," Jim Andrews, CEO of Granite Shore Power, said in a statement.

Renewable energy plans

Schiller Station in Portsmouth, which uses fossil fuels only at times of peak demand, will stop by June 2025. A biomass boiler produces renewable energy around the clock, according to its website.

The station will transition into a battery energy storage system, "taking energy from the grid during low demand and putting it back on the grid during peak periods," according to the company.

The system will help store energy from wind power being built off the coast of Martha's Vineyard and in the Gulf of Maine.

"The New Hampshire Seacoast is an area of high-energy demand and through the repowering of Schiller Station, we will provide carbon neutral power to support the businesses and families of New Hampshire," Andrews said.

Merrimack Station has a maximum capacity of 482 megawatts between its two coal-fired steam units and two kerosene-fueled combustion turbines, which is reached typically only in peak winter months, according to its website.

A 50-50 partnership between Atlas Holdings of Greenwich, Connecticut, and Castleton Commodities International of Stamford, Connecticut, bought the plant from Eversource for \$175 million in 2018. Castleton Commodities International no longer has an ownership interest, according to its website.

The plant will continue to operate while the 400-acre property is redeveloped.

"What closing and retir-



DAVID LANE/UNION LEADER

Merrimack Station, the coal-burning plant in Bow, is seen from the hills to its west Wednesday.

ing these coal plants does is it really shuts the door and allows us to make investments towards renewables," said Cathy Corkery,

senior organizer of the New Hampshire Sierra Club.

Josh Stebbins, managing attorney for the Sierra Club, said no further details have

been provided on Granite Shore Power's plans for its clean energy center.

In 2019, the Sierra Club and Conservation Law

Foundation sued the plant owners, saying the power plant did not meet permit requirements for monitoring thermal discharges.

Eclipse

short duration — a long weekend — but for that concentrated period of time, it's going to be a very big deal."

It's also rare. A total solar eclipse — in which the moon completely covers the sun for a few minutes, creating a pitch-black "path of totality" — is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for many. It's been 99 years since New York had one, and 218 years for Ohio. This time around, the path of totality will stretch from Texas to Maine, covering parts of several states, including Missouri, Kentucky and Pennsylvania, along the way.

The boost to those economies could be significant. Texas, which is expected to get the biggest influx of visitors, could pocket \$428 million in eclipse-related spending, according to Ray Perryman, an economist in Waco. Johnson County, Indiana, is forecasting as

much as \$25 million in extra revenue, while Rochester, New York, expects about \$10 million.

Americans emerged from the pandemic ready to shell out, especially for memorable experiences. The total solar eclipse is the ultimate example, with the next one being two decades away for most of the United States. In all, as many as 3.7 million people are expected to travel to the path of totality for the eclipse, according to estimates from geographer Michael Zeiler.

Robust consumer spending — which has continued despite high prices — has kept the economy chugging along at a time when many had feared a recession. Spending on international travel and live entertainment surged nearly 30% last year, five times the rate of overall spending growth, as Americans splurged on European

vacations and Taylor Swift concerts. Eclipse travel is expected to fuel another spending boom.

Indiana, for example, is preparing for a record 500,000 visitors — more than seven times the attendance at the 2012 Super Bowl in Indianapolis, according to Amy Howell, vice president of tourism at the Indiana Destination Development Corporation.

State officials in transportation, natural resources and homeland security have been meeting for months to iron out logistics, such as port-a-potty availability and traffic plans, she said. Some schools are closed that day, and garbage collection will be on hold.

"We know how to host big events, but this is huge — bigger than the Super Bowl and the Indy 500 put together, plus the state fair, which is 18 days long," she said. "We're expecting to have all

of those visitors in one day."

A thousand miles away, Steven Wright is making similar calculations at his Vermont ski resort. The 900 rooms at Jay Peak have been sold out since last spring, with the earliest eclipse-related reservations arriving five years ago. In all, some 8,000 people are expected to take part in the resort's festivities, which start at \$365 for two people.

A Pink Floyd cover band will play the "Dark Side of the Moon" album right as the eclipse begins. Also unfolding then: a 50-person wedding on the mountain's peak.

"It's an awful lot of buildup for a few minutes," said Wright, the property's general manager.

These types of viewing parties are cropping up everywhere, including at alpaca farms in Texas, Hot Springs National Park in Arkansas and the Indianapolis

Motor Speedway. For those seeking a more exclusive experience, T.E.I. Tours and Travel is offering private path-of-totally flights starting at \$9,750 per person.

The Planetary Society, a nonprofit headed by Bill Nye "the Science Guy," is hosting a 1,000-person camp-out at a wedding venue in Fredericksburg, Texas. There will be astronomy talks in the glass chapel and telescopes and games on the lawn. Tickets are \$325 a pop, and so far the attendee list includes people from nearly all 50 states, plus Finland, Japan and Spain.

"We are huge space nerds, and seeing a total solar eclipse, it stirs something deeply profound inside of us," spokeswoman Danielle Gunn said. "People travel all over the world to see this — and once you see one total eclipse, you get why."

Kuster

re-election in 2024," Kuster said Wednesday in a statement.

Kuster, 67, said she'll spend the rest of her term helping to lead the New Democratic Coalition and broker bipartisan compromise legislation.

"This work has been many things — rewarding, frustrating, inspiring, and challenging, but, more than anything, it has been an honor," Kuster said.

"As your congresswoman, I have had the chance to meet directly with the people who make New Hampshire such an incredible place to live, work, and raise a family. From our small business owners to our first responders, farmers, teachers, veterans, health care providers, seniors, and local leaders, every conversation has been insightful and has guided my efforts in Washington."

Gov. Chris Sununu wished Kuster well but said this decision gives his Republican party a great opportunity to flip the seat this fall.

"This is a winnable district for both Republicans and Democrats," Sununu said.

In 2021, Sununu vetoed redistricting maps created by the GOP Legislature that would have made Kuster's district more Democratic as legislative leaders sought to

make it easier for a Republican to knock off three-term U.S. Rep. Chris Pappas, D-N.H., who represents the 1st District.

"I didn't want to give a job for life to a Democrat in CD 2," Sununu said.

Pappas said Kuster was a trusted ally who will go down in history as the first woman elected to that seat and the Democrat who held it the longest.

"Annie is a trailblazer and a respected leader who always puts the needs of Granite Staters first," Pappas said.

This decision was unexpected in political circles. In the past 16 months, Kuster has been active on the job and on the campaign trail.

A prodigious fundraiser, Kuster had raised \$1.6 million by the end of 2023 and had more than \$1 million in the bank for a reelection bid.

Kuster's record

While in office, Kuster worked with then-U.S. Rep. Frank Guinta, R-N.H., to create a group focused on adopting policies to battle the opioid epidemic — now called the Bipartisan Mental Health and Substance Use Disorder Task Force.

A Republican Congressional Campaign Committee spokesperson pointed out that more incumbent House Democrats than Re-

publicans have decided to leave at the end of this year.

"Yet another extreme House Democrat does not want anything to do with running on the same ballot with failure Joe Biden. Add her to the ever growing list of Democrats fleeing for the exits rather than defend a broken border, rising gas prices and slow economy," said Savannah Viar.

In the House, Kuster, who has spoken publicly about being sexually assaulted in college, co-chaired the Bipartisan Task Force to End Sexual Violence.

Brendan Williams, of the New Hampshire Health Association, said Kuster was a tireless advocate who fought to increase grants for nursing homes after a COVID-19 pandemic funding formula shortchanged small rural states like New Hampshire.

Democratic Party Chairman Raymond Buckley said he has been an admirer and personal friend of Kuster's for 50 years.

"Representative Kuster wasn't just a leader in the Granite State, she was a national figure who made working across the aisle a staple of her leadership. She was also willing to stand up to her own party and defended New Hampshire's first-in-the-nation primary. For that and so much more, I am forever grateful for her

service to our state," Buckley said.

The 2nd District spans the entire western length of the state from Nashua to the Canadian border.

Kuster's departure is likely to attract interest from prominent Democrats who represent the areas of Nashua, Concord, Keene and the Upper Valley.

Former Executive Councilor Colin Van Ostern of Concord, the 2016 Democratic nominee for governor, was one of the first to congratulate Kuster.

"Annie has spoken truth to power on countless issues, like fighting to end the war in Iraq and for full LGBT equality before either were popular views even in the democratic party," Van Ostern said in a statement.

Van Ostern's last campaign was a bid to defeat former Secretary of State Bill Gardner in 2018. The New Hampshire Legislature, which selects the state's top election official, picked Gardner by a narrow margin.

List could be long

Other Democrats who could consider a bid include Senate Assistant Democratic Leader Becky Whitley, D-Hopkinton; Senate Deputy Democratic Leader Cindy Rosenwald of Nashua; Sens. Suzanne Prentiss of Lebanon and

Donovan Fenton of Keene, Stonyfield Farm Yogurt co-founder and Democratic fundraiser Gary Hirshberg; and 2016 Democratic candidate for governor Andru Volinsky of Concord.

When former Rep. Carol Shea-Porter, D-N.H., decided she was retiring in 2018, 11 Democrats ran in a competitive primary, which Pappas won.

Assuming Kuster would run again, no well-known Republicans have been in the field, in contrast to the 1st Congressional District, where three GOP hopefuls are running in hopes of defeating Pappas.

Now that Kuster is out, Republicans who may consider a run include 2022 GOP nominee Robert Burns of Pembroke, runner-up and former Keene Mayor George Hansel, 2022 U.S. Senate hopeful Vikram Mansharamani of Lincoln and Bow, Insurance Commissioner D.J. Bettencourt of Salem and Steve Negron of Nashua, who has lost two runs for the seat.

Declared Republicans include Lily Tang Williams of Weare, a Chinese-born college professor who finished third in the 2022 primary, and Mark Kilbane, an Army veteran and businessman from Nashua who finished ninth in the 1st Congressional District primary, which Karoline Leavitt won in

2022.

Greg Moore, state director of the fiscally conservative Americans for Prosperity, who is also a GOP campaign operative, said national Republican leaders likely will look fondly on candidates who either have personal wealth or quick access to plenty of campaign cash to become viable in this shortened campaign cycle.

"Both parties already have a lot of seats to defend and until today this one wasn't in the top tier for the RCCC," Moore said. "Depending on who emerges in the next weeks and few months, that outlook could change."

Kuster, whose parents were liberal Republican state Sen. Susan McLane and GOP Executive Councilor Malcolm McLane, thanked her husband, Brad, and two sons, for their support.

Before serving in Congress, Kuster was a lawyer and health care lobbyist in the law firm led by former Attorney General Tom Rath.

Kuster's decision to step aside doesn't necessarily end her career in elective politics.

Many Democratic observers view Kuster as a leading contender if U.S. Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, D-N.H., decides not to run again in 2026.

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