

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Holiday Picnics can Coexist With Retail Shopping Hours

This week's column concerns shopping in Massachusetts on holidays. The subject first came to my attention legislatively because of my membership on the Joint Committee on Commerce and Labor. While other states have extended retailers' hours to include most holidays, our state still subscribes to limitations. Several changes to our present holiday closing laws have recently been proposed, and bills on those proposals were heard by the committee.

Each state establishes its own rules to dictate the hours and days that retail establishments cannot be open for business. Known collectively as "blue laws," they began in the 18th century, when all commerce ceased on holidays throughout the nation. The laws have been altered in this century as our society has changed, and today 49 states have repealed mandatory holiday closings. Only one state is left in Massachusetts.

Change arrives slowly in the Commonwealth, but it has been coming. Stores that were closed on Armistice Day and Washington's Birthday in earlier years are open for today's Veterans Day and Presidents Day. The next step, now under consideration by the legislature, is the inclusion of Memorial Day, Independence Day and Labor Day for limited retail hours. Merchants would not be required to be open for business, but they would have that option. "Retailers could act as they did on Easier Sunday, a day they were allowed to operate, but were generally closed in Massachusetts and Connecticut."

The committee has heard testimony on bills seeking such expansion, with retailers asking the freedom to do business and labor unions resisting the added work hours for their members. I have received letters and cards on both sides of the subject, and several of you have mentioned the issue when you have seen me on the street. Some of you want the convenience of shopping; some want the day off. Some of you resent the uneven application of regulations in different towns.

After listening to everyone's concerns, my memory goes back to a television news story that I saw one holiday evening. The reporter stood in a Connecticut mall parking lot in the midst of hundreds of Massachusetts cars. With different laws in place, those cars' owners could have been shopping in Massachusetts, increasing both the economic health and the sales tax collections of the state. The employees could have been earning additional income, again improving the financial health of Massachusetts.

I believe in Fourth of July parades. And I understand the importance of holiday family picnics. But when the rest of the country has decided that traditional holiday celebrations can co-exist with retail shopping hours, and when many of our state's residents live within an easy drive of a border state's mall, I lean toward the case for bringing Massachusetts into line with other area states.

Let me know your thoughts on the subject. You may write to me in Longmeadow (22 Warren Terrace) or Boston. My Boston address is Room 39, State House, Boston, MA 02133.