

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Welfare Debate

Early this month, Speaker Charles Flaherty announced to members of the house that the 1995 budget would soon be ready for debate. "Bring your sleeping bags," he advised, and he meant it. That debate started Monday, May 9, continued to midnight on four long days and was finally completed in the early hours of May 13. In spite of the inauspicious date of Friday the thirteenth, the budget was approved by the overwhelming support of both parties with a margin of 151-3.

Important budget items included education and highway funding. The education reform law of 1993 received full funding and state higher education was financed at a significantly higher level than last year. Money for local road maintenance was approved, although the highway funding that will resurface Longmeadow Street still awaits authorization. Non-monetary budget amendments, the so-called outside sections that often dominate the budget process were held to a minimum.

Each year a different issue dominates the debate, and this year that issue was the Massachusetts welfare system. Chairman Thomas Finneran of the House Ways and Means Committee proposed a substantial overhaul to the system. That restructuring will change a program that encourages dependency and discourages individual efforts to leave the world of welfare. The house debated and endorsed his proposal to cut the basic stipend, limit eligibility to two years and provide day care so parents can participate in educational or job training programs.

As a result of that approval, with the concurrence of the state senate, Massachusetts will no longer increase family AFDC grants if additional children are born after that family is enrolled in the program. Food stamps and Medicaid assistance will provide for the food and health care of the children, but no additional cash grants will be forthcoming.

My proposal to implement fingerprint identification for welfare applicants was additional measure accepted as a trial program in Hampden County. The program has a limited scope because budget planners were concerned about high costs of implementation. It is my belief that the trial will show benefits that outweigh the initial investment.

The House budget for 1995 is the fourth successive balanced budget and the first one that does not rely on one-time revenue sources and other extraordinary mechanisms to achieve that balance. It continues the trend of our state government to recognize the limits of the state's resources while providing for critical needs. It had the endorsement of most Democrats and, for the first time in my experience, it had the unanimous support of Republican members. The budget now advances to the senate for the consideration of that body. Then a conference committee will convene to combine the spending plans into a single document that will guide Massachusetts through another year of recovery.