

Massachusetts Higher Education

The past few weeks have been cliffhangers for many of us who are working to ensure the funding of our state colleges and university system. Now, finally, we can breathe a sigh of relief at the funding picture for the coming school year. These are the close calls that we have survived in the budget process.

The first reality of the budget is this: revenues have been lower than we expected as recently as January, when Governor Weld presented his budget. The legislature spent the early months of the year looking for areas of the governor's budget to trim, at the same time recognizing our obligation to certain increased accounts. We made a multi-year commitment to fund public education, so our first priority was to provide \$232 million in additional state subsidy for local school districts. Our second commitment was to increase local aid from lottery receipts by \$51 million, and we kept that promise. Higher education was maintained at last year's level, but the budget could not fund any additions.

Then our ways and means committee chairman rechecked his calculations and discovered a \$35 million mistake. Fortunately for all of us, it was \$35 million in our favor. A substantial portion of that money was then assigned to the various colleges, community colleges and the university. The next critical point came when budget was passed and sent to the governor for his signature.

Gov. Weld is aware that our professional teaching staff is due for a new contract. Keeping in mind that the state is extremely short of funds, he decided that the money budgeted for general expenses of higher education should be assigned to fund the contract, so he exercised his line item veto to cut \$19 million and hold that money to fund a negotiated wage agreement.

Typically the legislature considers overriding an occasional veto, but last week we broke world records for the number of times that veto was overridden. In one afternoon the House voted 45 times to restore money to the budget. As a result, the schools will have their full funding come September. I know that leaves salaries unconsidered, but it was more important to have basic infrastructure funding in place for the year.

The House of Representatives took another step to restore our higher education system last month when we approved a capital bond for our schools. The past ten years of diminished state funds have imposed a severe cost on the campuses throughout the state. Just as our towns delayed capital maintenance in hard times, so did our schools. That deferred maintenance can now be addressed, from the corroded Westfield State power grid to the deteriorating 19th century Amherst buildings.

With all of the actions I have outlined, we are now one year closer to renewing our system of public higher education in Massachusetts.