

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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The Bell Tolls for the Session

A December ritual that has guided the Massachusetts legislature since my first year in office was changed this year. Following guidelines laid out in a new set of joint rules adopted by the house and senate, we recessed at midnight, November 15. In spite of the relatively short session, we produced important legislation for the state.

Until now, every session has ended with a week of last-minute compromises and frantic phone calls, either the week before Christmas or the last week of the year. That activity was part of the rush to finish one year's business before the constitutional deadline of the first Wednesday of the new year. In 1995 we demonstrated that there is a better way to govern.

Two provisions in the new rules led to an early and orderly end to the legislative calendar. The early end came from a rule mandating the mid-November closure. The orderly finale came from adopting a two-year calendar that keeps most bills alive for a second year. The new rules have served Massachusetts well.

The shorter session forced us to work efficiently, and we showed that efficiency by enacting important new laws. We lowered the taxes on state banks in order to encourage their business in Massachusetts. We established new rules for elder housing complexes to address the risks associated with younger, possibly dangerous residents. And on the very last day, we enacted a new corporate tax law designed to keep manufacturing jobs in Massachusetts.

Both houses in the legislature have made procedural changes to accommodate the new calendar, although some of the details remain to be worked out. For example, we are still studying the legislative status of bills that deal with bonds or the budget. Bond items may expire if they have not been acted on by both branches. Because it was determined that budget items vetoed with Gov. Weld's line-item veto cannot be overridden after December, several budget issues we're taken up on the last day of the session.

The benefits of an early close to the session will lead to efficiencies next year from the extended calendar. We adopted the standards used by Congress that allow each bill to survive for the entire two-year session, so most bills will retain their status as we prepare for another year. More than five thousand bills were filed this year, and most did not become laws. Ordinarily the same number of bills would be reprinted, cataloged and assigned to committees. Time and effort will be saved, although the paper savings alone would make the effort worthwhile.

I have worked since my first term of office to bring efficiencies to our legislative process. Several factors led to their adoption this year. Close scrutiny by the press and the public played a part. The changes in Congress may be another contributing factor. The causes were many, making Massachusetts the winner as we consolidate our gains.