

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

February 12, 1998

State of the State

Last week the State House was filled with ceremonial beginnings to the 1998 legislative year. The intense activity followed an interval of quiet. In the waning weeks of 1997 the house chamber was closed for renovations; house sessions were held in an ordinary hearing room; and the governor was working on his first State of the State address to the legislature.

Only a few days before the scheduled session opening, plywood barriers blocked entry to the chamber and painters were hard at work. But the deadlines were met, the new legislature convened, and we prepared to hear the priorities of the speaker of the house and the governor.

The speaker's address to the people of Massachusetts is a recent addition to state business. Speaker Finneran devised the speech last year as an occasion to define his vision for the year ahead, and this year he delivered it for a second time. Governor Cellucci followed a few days later with the traditional State of the State speech.

In his address the speaker covered many of the legislative items pending before the house or senate. Concerning prison crowding, he advocates alternative sentencing for non-violent offenders, and regarding court house construction, he urged the different factions to settle the differences that have produced an impasse. He proceeded to discuss competency tests for education reform (standards must be upheld) and tax cuts (too early to tell).

Governor Cellucci limited his speech to in-depth coverage of two topics: education and taxes. In a bold move, he announced the objective of adding a total of 4,000 new public school teachers in order to reduce class size. Like the speaker he cautioned his listeners against lowering the standards we have set for competency tests. His tax program, however, was Cellucci's own. He advocates an income tax reduction from 5.95 percent to 5 percent and a lower tax on unearned income.

The two leaders both included educational testing as priorities because this is the year the state will first test our students for mastery of the education reform curriculum. The State has pumped over a billion dollars of new funding into the public schools since 1993 in order to improve the quality of education. Tests are now ready to assess the performance of students. Tenth graders will be tested for mastery and the law says those students must master certain subjects before they can graduate.

The difference of approach on taxes may appear greater now than down the road. Speaker Finneran wants to wait until revenue projections are reported in April for the coming year before he commits to reduce the tax rate, while the governor feels our economy has already proved it is strong enough for tax reductions. I opened the year with a byline that supports tax cuts and am likely to address the topic again from time to time. I will also report on the testing process as the year progresses. For now, I will simply report that the legislature is again ready to tackle the new year's agenda.