

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Patching Together a Budget

If this were the ideal situation I would be writing about the state budget for the fiscal year that started July 1, but this is not an ideal year. The conference between the House and the Senate has yet to report a compromise spending plan for Massachusetts, so the state has no budget. In the interim, the legislature has addressed some of the fiscal necessities of the state, so this is a report about those items.

Government has continued to function in absence of a budget through the patchwork of emergency "one twelfth" appropriations for the months of July and August. Cities and towns, however, suffer from the absence of extra appropriations that fall outside that formula. Last week the legislature used the vehicles of a supplemental budget and a bond bill to take care of some of those needs.

Most important for town government is Chapter 90, the law that provides state assistance for local roadwork. Because much of the work cannot be done during winter months, we were all relieved that we could approve funding this summer.

Though our town's thoroughfares are well maintained, I'm sure we can think of a road or sidewalk that could benefit from some of that money. The most time-sensitive issues on a statewide basis are road, bridge and other capital projects, many of which have been approved, bid and contracted. The legislature approved funding for those projects. Longmeadow's residents will benefit from the \$1.3 million allocated to the Springfield City Library and the \$1.4 million that will be granted to the East Longmeadow Library. I cannot even count the number of phone calls that have come to me over the months and years that those library projects have awaited funding.

I will close with one more reference to the overall state budget. As you may know, the budget has been a work in progress for some time now. Governor Cellucci submitted his spending plan to the House in January. The House of Representatives presented our budget to the Senate in May, and that body passed a budget in June. Each proposed budget has a bottom line just under \$21 billion, but beyond that similarity they are quite distinct. The governor's budget can be ignored by the conference committee, but the two branches of the legislature must agree to one document.

These are some of the facts that must be compromised: The House provides an income tax reduction, while the Senate limits its tax cuts to targeted groups of taxpayers. The House tackles the budget buster at the MBTA, Boston's transit system, by establishing a system of forward funding, while the Senator is silent on that subject. Education funding for cities and towns is different in the two budgets. Many expenditures exist in only one document, and funding all of them would create a budget that is seriously out of balance.

The consensus in the State House is that Massachusetts will have a budget for the fiscal year that is now six weeks old only when the leaders of the two branches of the legislature come to a meeting of the minds. I am glad that last week's legislation met some of the needs of our citizens. Beyond that, I can only wait with you for the opportunity to see, approve and adopt the budget for Fiscal Year 2000.