

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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A Budget At Last

The inconsistency between fiscal years and calendar years can sometimes be confusing, and when this year's state budget becomes part of that discussion the confusion is magnified. For the record, the Massachusetts fiscal year begins halfway through the calendar year. July 1 marked the beginning of fiscal year 2000. It is also true that the budget dictating spending for the year was signed into law on November 16.

The budget was delayed while conferees representing the House and Senate argued about how much to spend on which areas of government. Frustrated with that delay, I looked into the record books to find out if we were setting any records with our procrastination. This is what I discovered.

Our state budget has been adopted later. Once. In 1965, the budget was not adopted until December 31. The structure of the legislature requires appropriations bills to expire at the end of the calendar year, so that appears to be the last possible date for enactment.

Delaying a budget until the year is half over might seem to be the absolute delay, but one state has exceeded that lag. In the 1930s legislators in the state of Rhode Island could not resolve their budget negotiations. Probably because of personalities, the months passed but the budget did not. Eventually senate gave up and went home.

The story is told that the governor then called the senate back into session and sent out police officers to escort the lawmakers to the state house. They were, however, determined not to convene, so they fled the state and sought refuge in Massachusetts. Massachusetts would not extradite the solons and, as a result, the budget never was enacted. Rhode Island went through the entire year with automatic month-to-month appropriations of one twelfth of the budget of the prior year.

I am writing about the Rhode Island experience to let us all know that even though our budget was four months late, it could have been worse. We do have a budget now and it provides significant new benefits for many individuals and groups of people. Areas of particular note include substantial funding for public schools and higher education, provisions for income tax relief with additional tax relief targeted to certain segments of the population. Senior citizens with low incomes and significant pharmaceutical needs will benefit from expansions to the state senior pharmacy program.

The budget had three earlier versions, one each from the governor, the house and the senate, and the final document was higher than any of its predecessors. Because he believed the bottom line was too high, Governor Cellucci vetoed some expenditures to maintain the fiscal discipline we have come to expect, but most of those vetoes were overridden by the legislature. State officials have no doubt breathed a sigh of relief as they go about the business of governing.

As the calendar year draws to a close, it is already time for the administration to begin planning the budget of the next fiscal year. I can only hope, for all our sakes, that the coming fiscal year's budget will arrive more smoothly than the budget of the year 2000.