

Beacon Hill Byline – By Rep. Mary Rogeness

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The Gavel Comes Down

Following the rules that govern its calendar, the legislature last week gaveled the year's formal sessions to an end at midnight, July 31. At that deadline, debate on all controversial legislation ceased. The laws that were passed were set before the governor. Those that remain will take one of two roads. They may be enacted if no legislative opposition is raised. Or they will die, possibly to reappear as new bills next year.

The last day of any session reminds me of the last day before a student must turn in a term paper. Tremendous amounts of work that could have been done over time are completed only when the deadline has arrived.

The end of session is always a frantic time, but the past two years have been more frenzied than usual because of late passage of the state budget. Both years the budget has been sent to the governor's office at the last possible minute. Massachusetts, like most states gives the governor a line item veto, and Governor Cellucci used that veto to reduce state spending by \$175 million. The veto message was delivered just before the final day's session, so the rush to override vetoes added to the existing bustle as lawmakers and lobbyists worked to turn bills into laws.

These are a few of the accomplishments of the final hours of the session.

Transportation bond. This bill authorizes road and bridge maintenance. It was in a conference committee until the end of session, when it was approved unanimously by both the senate and house.

Final deficiency budget. Enactment of this bill allows the state to meet unfunded obligations from the last fiscal year.

Charter School expansion. This is another bill from conference committee. As the Republican house member on this conference, I advocated for significant increase in the number of charter schools. Our compromise bill increasing the number from 50 to 120 charters was enacted without opposition on the last day of session.

Community Preservation Act. This law, also a conferenced item, passed on the last day of session, but it did not pass unanimously. Primarily a proposal to encourage communities to purchase undeveloped land, it also imposed a fee on deed registration of \$20. The fee would apply throughout the state, adding as much as \$100 to closing costs on a real estate transaction. The money generated would be available to communities that imposed additional real estate taxes through tax overrides. Governor Cellucci returned the bill to the legislature with a reduced fee schedule. It remains to be seen if the legislature will unanimously accept his amendment, thereby allowing the bill to become law.

Budget vetoes were overridden throughout the day, adding to the state budget.

Overall, the budget goes into effect chiefly as it was passed in June, though several vetoes of high priority to members were not taken up because time ran out. It is my hope that the frustration felt by members can be channeled into passing a more timely budget next year. The governor has only 10 days to send the legislature his vetoes, so we would have plenty of time to deal with those items if we completed the budget on time.

The legislature will continue to meet throughout the year, dealing with routine matters. And as the new year approaches, new bills will be filed. Then the struggle for new laws will begin all over again.