

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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The Legislature Catches Its Breath

Congress made news last week as they wrapped up business and left for a summer recess. The House adjourned after passing a Patients' Bill of Rights, and the Senate went home after adopting budget proposals. Our legislature does not have such a defined break in the action, but the pace is certainly slower in the month of August.

This week's Byline will talk about some of the achievements to date – and what will be going on in Boston in August.

A major accomplishment for our region was the enactment of a Springfield Convention Center bill last month, after many stops and starts. I have lived in town long enough to remember when the Civic Center was new, but it is now 30 years old and in need of substantial renewal. The legislature approved funding for renovations two years ago, but subsequent marketing studies showed the need for additional convention and meeting space. The additional cost required new bonding authority and approvals by repeated votes in the both legislative bodies. The bill is now law, and we can watch for new construction activity on Springfield's Mains Street.

Civic Center improvements are critical to our region, but Boston area representatives also have a critical need for new low and moderate cost housing. The high cost of housing has led to a new bill that encourages new development option. The town of Longmeadow has recently received state money to assist with initiating construction at Genesis House, and East Longmeadow used state incentives to build the new homes on Benton Drive. The House last month approved new bonding and standards for such construction in future, and these bills have been sent to the Senate.

The budget for this fiscal year is unfortunately not on the list of legislative achievements. Passed by both houses, it remains in conference committee. The two branches have different legislative priorities and three conferees from each body are working to represent a compromise. Resolution does not appear to be in the near future, and I hope we do not have an extended budget impasse. Two years ago, the budget was not resolved until November, four months into the fiscal year.

This column opened by stating that the legislature will stay in session all month. Such House sessions are generally known as informal sessions, but this year they will be more informal than usual. Sessions will be held in a committee meeting room, while construction workers remove asbestos from the ceiling of the House chamber. Here are some of the items that can be considered in informal sessions.

The bills must be noncontroversial. Our state is organized so that the cities and towns often require legislative approval in order to make changes in their operation. Establishing a new revolving fund for a local planning board's use; authorizing a liquor license beyond the number allowed according to population; approving the results of a local election when the ballot contained a misprint – all of these actions require passage of a bill. Each is an example from the current session.

If the budget is resolved, all members will quickly return to Boston to pass it into law. Otherwise, we will be spending more time checking in with the people, the neighborhoods and the towns we represent. Although my leadership position in the caucus requires me to monitor the House sessions, I look forward to spending more time with you.