

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

November 29, 2001

The Budget Barely Beats the Clock

Far be it from me to criticize a person for waiting to the last minute to meet a deadline. That is why deadlines exist. After all, a library book is on time if it is deposited after hours in the return slot. Blockbuster accepts a movie that is returned at the last minute. And many late night sessions have produced successful college term papers. I know all of these facts from experience. But our state has delayed, while 49 other states have adopted budgets, and I think that lack of progress gives procrastination a bad name. We pushed our deadline to a new extreme, waiting until minutes before the session's end to enact a budget for the year.

The legislature created its own predicament with a five-year-old rule. In a well-publicized effort to improve the workings of our institution, we adopted a rule stating that controversial matters and the roll call votes that accompany them must cease by midnight of the third Wednesday in November. (We did not plan on that day falling the day before Thanksgiving.)

The rule succeeded in its stated purpose of ending the pattern of late-night State House sessions that typically closed out the month December. It did not, however, put an end to all late night sessions. As may be expected, the last day of any session brings with it a flurry of last-minute bills. On the other hand, since the state budget is supposed to be enacted by the first day of July, the budget is not expected to be one of those bills. This year it was.

Here is a review of last week's business.

On Monday I arrived in Boston, hoping to see the budget. Over the weekend, press reports announced an agreement between Speaker Finneran and Senate President Birmingham. But I soon learned that it was an agreement on "frameworks," and the budget was still being written.

Tuesday, House members received a briefing on the budget, but it was still not available. It was finally posted on the Internet at 11:58 pm, barely meeting the requirement to be available on the calendar day before its presentation for approval.

Wednesday, we debated and passed the budget, as did the Senate. Numerous rules were suspended in order to accomplish its enactment in a single day.

This is my initial reaction to the budget; it protects school aid, but severely limits state assistance to town road maintenance. It retains a supplemental school nurse initiative, but takes money from the tobacco trust to fund the program. It underfunds Medicaid, snow removal, and many human service accounts, all of which will require supplemental budgets before the end of the year in order to function.

I debated and voted against the budget because of the process that produced it and the bottom line. Two legislative leaders caused an unconscionable delay in the inevitable production of a budget. It does not appear to face the reality that state revenues cannot meet earlier projections, and that omission will result in more difficult budgeting next year.

I am, however, thankful that the legislature had the foresight in the mid-nineties to adopt a rule terminating our session before Thanksgiving Day. If our rules allowed us to meet through December, the state might still be the only state in the Union without a budget.