

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Protecting the Environment for All

Last week I drove to Boston for a busy legislative session. Controversial items were on the agenda – a constitutional convention with the senate, a bilingual education bill and, almost as an afterthought, an environmental bond.

The bond was the only non-controversial item on the agenda, or so it seemed until members had a chance to read it. We expected a simple piece of legislation authorizing the state to borrow money for open space preservation, parkland and other worthwhile endeavors. But, even as I headed toward the State House, the day's schedule was deteriorating.

A headline in the day's Boston Herald sounded the first warning. "Bacon Hill," it trumpeted in the paper's typical banner style. The bill, published late the night before, authorized \$400 million in bonds, money that was generally unrestricted as to its use. But certain house members, those closely tied to Speaker Finneran, would reap millions of dollars earmarked for pet projects in their districts.

When people hear about the bond, they ask these natural questions. Why is the legislature taking on this debate when the budget is still unsettled? How can the state even think about spending hundreds of millions of dollars when we are having trouble paying the final bills for this fiscal year? Let me try to answer the questions.

We are working a bill that was previously engrossed by the senate. Work must be completed by the end of July because our rules require formal sessions to end July 31. It is standard procedure to fund large environmental projects through bonds for the same reason schools and other capital projects use bonds. They are long term investments paid for over time as our homes are paid for over time with a mortgage. Fiscal planners designate a bond limit, and the budget sets aside money to pay the cost.

The legislature should not, however, be allocating bond money to favored projects at the expense of other priorities. Most legislators accepted as fact that money, even bond money, is in short supply. That supply shrinks even more if portions are committed before the bill is passed.

The house of representatives just finished passing a budget that cut funding for many local programs. Seeing that the restraint of that budget process had been repealed for favored representatives, legislators reacted by immediately introducing more than 100 amendments to set aside money for our own projects. In addition to targeting some money to our region, I sponsored an alternate amendment to remove all mandated spending from the bill.

At the end of the day last Wednesday, the constitutional convention recessed without taking up controversial topics. The bilingual bill did not even come up. And the environmental bond was moved to this week's schedule, to be debated on Tuesday, the same day as Longmeadow's override, too late for my deadline.

If you ask me what the legislature accomplished that day, the obvious answer would be "nothing". But that does not tell the whole story. We opened up a closed system. We stopped a favor-filled bill from advancing toward enactment into law. And we learned again the forgotten lesson, "Don't assume anything."