

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

May 15, 2003

State budget takes another step toward enactment

The state budget took another step toward enactment last week when the house of representatives engrossed our version of the budget for fiscal year 2004. The bill was engrossed late Thursday night after a week of debate. Here are the budget highlights and the reasons that I was one of 29 votes against engrossment.

We entered the debate after a week of sessions that rejected new revenue streams, either through new gambling or higher taxes. Accepting the \$3 billion shortfall, members had no means of approving programs at existing or maintenance levels. We sometimes felt like we were simply "moving the deck chairs on the Titanic" as we struggled to add a little more money to particular programs.

The priorities of the Prescription Advantage and School Building Assistance programs were the only substantial budget restorations Prescription Advantage provides affordable prescriptions to elderly or disabled individuals, and its survival was a high priority for 80,000 prescriptions to elderly or disabled individuals, and its survival was a high priority for 80,000 subscribers. School Building Assistance was funded in order to keep last year's promise to fund specific construction projects, including one located in Springfield. School committees throughout the state are now reassured that their approved projects will be funded in future years. New federal funds and re-allocation of discretionary local aid dollars were assigned to the programs.

Funding for services to the blind and hard of hearing as well as other targeted human services were increased minimally, but overall the spartan budget of the ways and means committee was unchanged.

I worked with other Republican members to increase local aid throughout the state by changing the distribution formula, and was disappointed at the parliamentary maneuver of the house leadership that precluded a vote on the proposal. It would have added state dollars to more than 90% of the state's cities and towns, reducing the 18% cut in state aid experienced by Longmeadow and many other communities. Though we debated against it, the same procedural maneuver was applied later in the week to prevent a vote on abolishing the \$14 million president's office of the University of Massachusetts.

No legislator wanted to vote for the restricted programs in the budget, though most of us agreed that we must live within the limited revenues available this year. The opposing votes Thursday evening came from two distinct groups. Some were members like me who voted against the parliamentary procedures that prevented important votes. Others voted no because they wanted the additional government spending that simply could not be supported by the existing revenues.

The budget has now been sent to the senate, which will publish its version next week. For the first time in my memory, senators have indicated they will accept much of our document, signifying that a unified budget can be sent to Governor Romney by mid-June. We will meet the calendar deadline that many other state legislatures are missing. We will launch a new fiscal year having dealt with the harsh realities of limited resources. And we will move one step closer to working through the recessionary years behind us.