

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Getting the Budget Enacted On Time

The legislature has written, debated and enacted a budget, and we accomplished those tasks ahead of schedule. During the boom years of the '90s, the legislature apparently mastered the art of delivering timely balanced budgets to the governor's desk. Tax revenues were pouring in; education funding was generous; and program initiatives were plentiful. Now we are back on track. The budget is on Governor Romney's desk where it will have his signature, along with line item vetoes by the end of this week.

If you recall that the budget limped across the finish line only a few years ago in late November, you can appreciate the weeks of work, the spirit of cooperation, and the sense of commitment that achieved this year's goal.

The house of representatives debated the budget in late April; the senate in mid-May, and the conference committee finished its work in mid-June. The compromise budget contains important achievements along with some omissions. Overall it should serve the state well in the coming year.

On the plus side, it is balanced, though it achieves that balance by using some of the state's dwindling reserve (rainy day) account. It provides stable local aid and school funding, a real benefit to Longmeadow, which received substantial reductions in both accounts a year ago. The budget increased state assistance for special education costs, a benefit that will ease that burden for our schools and those throughout the state. And it enhanced the funding of social programs that have taken substantial reductions in recent years.

On the down side, let's look at some of the outside sections. A moratorium on new charter schools will impact new schools throughout the state that are well along in their plans to open their doors this September. The moratorium will affect the grass roots supporters of new charter schools and the students who have already been accepted for enrollment. It is an item Gov. Romney is likely to veto.

Also on the negative side, the senate's strong commitment to reorganizing the state's highway bureaucracy was not included in the house or in the final budget. That issue, a Romney initiative that has been resisted by house leadership, may well be addressed in the coming weeks in a separate bill that incorporates many of the senate provisions.

Throughout my years in the legislature, governors have always reduced the bottom line of the budget by reducing or eliminating some expenditures. Gov. Romney is likely to repeat that pattern, though it is not known to what extent he will trim costs. The budget's reliance on reserve dollars supports such action, while revenue growth over the past few months may limit his use of the veto pen.

The budget will be signed by next weekend, and the legislature will have three days to attempt to override vetoes. Having closed the present fiscal year with a healthy surplus, Massachusetts will enter fiscal year 2005 with its books in order. We are on the right track.