

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

August 1, 2004

End of the Session

The final day the legislature could meet for votes this year, Saturday, July 31, had an unusually short session, only two hours. Since the last day is usually filled with a flurry of last-minute activity, you may be surprised that the session was so short. The reality is that the session was supposed to end on the previous day. The only reason it extended to Saturday was that we had not finished business at midnight. The two-hour Saturday session took place between midnight and 2:00 a.m.

The marathon session capped off a productive year for the legislature. Here are some of the accomplishments of that session.

- The first accomplishment was a timely balanced budget. The governor signed the budget before the end of June, the earliest date since I became a representative. The state constitution requires a balanced budget, so that claim by itself is not exceptional, but legislative restraint coupled with an unexpected surplus of \$700 million in last year's budget combine to offer a hopeful signal for better times ahead.
- Second, Changes to School Building Assistance (SBA), the state program that helps communities build schools, will aid nearly every school district in the state. Initiated by a proposal from Governor Romney, the new program will pump state money into school building projects at an expedited rate, saving our town significant dollars for the Blueberry Hill and Wolf Swamp renovations. There is one cautionary note: unlike the governor's proposal, the new law commits future sales tax revenue to the projects, laying claim to funds that are now used for other expenditures.
- Third comes construction reform, an accomplishment that is a companion piece to SBA reform. Massachusetts public construction requirements are onerous, bureaucratic and inefficient. Our public buildings cost significantly more than private buildings or those in other states. Also introduced by the governor, the reforms will allow us to get more bang for our (tax) bucks.
- The fourth achievement is a work in progress. Highway-Turnpike consolidation is a goal the governor has pursued since his first days in office, and the goal is not yet met. However, this year the legislature made some steps in that direction. We set in place a timeline that will place a single administrator at the helm of transportation systems. Changing such well-established bureaucracies is a little like turning a battleship -- it takes a long time. The efficiencies and cost savings will make the changes well worthwhile.

By the end of last week's session, all of these bills had become law. The legislature will continue to deal with non-controversial bills throughout the remaining months of the year, with one early responsibility of approving a supplemental budget. From now until the end of the year, however, all legislation must be achieved through consensus. Overall, it looks to me like we had a very good year.