

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

December 12, 2004

New bills for the new session

When someone asked me last week if the legislature is out of session, I responded, “The Massachusetts legislature is never out of session.” Let me explain.

December should be a quiet month at the State House. Twice-weekly sessions deal with routine items as the chambers try to clean up the business of this two-year session. Controversial issues are not to be taken up, and as part of the Republican leadership team, it is my job to attend those sessions to make sure no such bill is enacted.

Even though the membership is not in the House chamber for sessions, however, the December after an election is a bustling time in Boston. This is the time that comes only once every two years, the time to file new bills for the coming session. Any bill that is filed “in a timely manner” is automatically processed into the committee schedule, so members work hard to meet the December deadline.

Leading up to the filing deadline, members rush to write down their ideas of how to improve the lives of Massachusetts residents. Then they send e-mails and letter to every other legislator asking us to become co-sponsors of their ideas. The most prolific bill-sponsor offered 15 pages of bill titles, but most members limit their filings to a page or two. Outside organizations weigh in supporting business, health care or environmental issues of their own.

At any rate, the deadline has come and gone, and the legislature has plenty of work lined up for January. As of last Friday, 3757 bills were filed in the house and 2022 in the senate.

What is in these bills? Some raise taxes and some reduce taxes. Many bills try to solve the perpetual problem of health care costs by proposing cost-saving innovation, while others would impose new costs to the system. Several bills endorse casinos and slot machines in many different ways, depending on the geographic location of the sponsor. Many are duplicated in several filings; some are re-filed from last year with the hope that another session will offer a successful outcome.

Some bills are even filed without the support of a single legislator. Any citizen in Massachusetts can petition for a new law, and the bill is filed at that request.

Right now, when the bills are new, each one has an equal chance of passage. They will quickly develop a more or less hopeful outlook when they work their way through the system.

Health care issues and casino bills are two topics to watch as the session gets going. Governor Romney has announced a new health care insurance program, and leaders in both the house and senate have expressed a strong interest in dealing with escalating health care costs. Casino bills have been stymied by the opposition of former Speaker Finneran, and supporters hope that Speaker DiMasi will allow them to proceed.

Even though we now have a total of 5,779 issues to deal with, don't be surprised if the most significant achievement of the next legislative session turns out to be something that has not yet appeared on our radar screen. Stay tuned because -- that's politics.