

Informal Accomplishments

“What’s happening in Boston this week?” is a question I am often asked. Well, Governor-elect Patrick is organizing his new administration; Governor Romney is responding to the constitutional convention recessing without deciding the gay marriage amendment; and the house and senate are holding informal sessions twice a week.

The legislature has been chugging along since August holding only “informal” sessions. In other words, we have taken no recorded votes. Bills can be passed only if no legislator objects. Even with this limitation, however, several significant laws are on the books. Here are some of the bills acted on in a single week.

First comes a new Child Labor bill. The first comprehensive overhaul of youth work rules since the Depression, this bill created much debate and disagreement early in the year. Since August, however, the bill’s advocates and opponents have worked to achieve a compromise. As a result it zipped last week through both the house and senate.

When you think of the different world of the 1930’s, you can understand why it is time to make some adjustments. The new law says 16 and 17 year-olds can work until 10:15 p.m. on school nights, an extension of 15 minutes from the previous limit. They can work until 11:30 on non-school nights, instead of the existing 10:00 limit. New supervisory rules include the requirement for adult supervision of such employees after 8:00 p.m. and the granting of enforcement powers to the attorney general.

The second significant bill enacted last week requires automatic external defibrillators (AEDs) in health clubs. Unlike the labor law, this one was filed too late for legislative action during formal sessions. Like many other safety items, the bill was filed after a tragic incident. A young woman collapsed while exercising at a health club. Her death in March caused her mother to lobby for the new law, since an AED might have saved her life. Assembled by organizations including the American Heart Association and a health club association, tweaked to address concerns of cost and liability, the bill was enacted last Monday.

Both of these described bills now await the governor’s approval.

A third important item, the Junior Operators License bill, made progress last week, though it has not yet been passed. Filed after several fatal accidents involving new drivers, the bill strengthens education, training and restrictions for new drivers. House and senate versions are different, and neither body will yield to the other. Much work has been invested in the bills, so we are making a last attempt to get the bill over the goal. A conference committee appointed last Monday will work to produce a compromise bill that can gain approval before the session ends next month. It should produce immediate life-saving results for young drivers, so I hope we can succeed.

These are the important policy achievements of informal sessions. But sometimes we also take up more parochial issues. For example, I am working to pass one more bill, a bill of strictly local interest. The new East Longmeadow Spoleto restaurant needs a law in order to acquire a liquor license. Massachusetts allocates limited numbers of such licenses according to each community’s population, and East Longmeadow has topped off. Liquor license bills are enacted almost daily as new restaurants are established around the state, so I am working to add one more to the list.

Watch with me to see if the Child Labor Bill and Defibrillator bills are signed by Governor Romney and if the Junior Operator bill becomes law. And if you will be able to order a glass of wine with dinner at Spoleto.