

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Here We Go Again!

No sooner had last year's legislative session adjourned than it was time to start all over. New bills, 6,000 of them, were filed by the January 10th deadline. That is perfectly normal. This year, however, Republican legislators introduced a new wrinkle into the bill-filing process.

All Republican representatives and senators got together to draft an agenda, file bills to support the agenda, and publicize our ideas throughout Massachusetts. Our actions mark the first time in memory that all legislators of the same party in both houses have made such a move.

As part of our effort to spread the news of our initiative, the house and senate minority leaders have traveled the state, meeting with newspaper editors from New Bedford to Springfield to Lowell. As part of that tour I joined House Minority Leader Brad Jones when he met with the *Springfield Republican* Editorial Board last week. Since we did not make it to the *Longmeadow News* offices, I'm using the Byline to write about some highlights of our agenda.

Titled "Toward a Better Massachusetts," the agenda addresses the real problems that real people are facing today. We start with the premise that every resident should have the opportunity to lead a good life and raise a family in Massachusetts. Then we proceeded to identify ways to strengthen that opportunity.

Housing, schools, jobs, taxes, environment; all contribute to a good life, and we address each of those items.

For housing, we recognize that buying a home is an important step for young families. Deciding to buy that first home is a decision to settle down in Massachusetts. We propose a tax-free savings account that can be used for a first down payment, and as another incentive we offer state help with closing costs. For senior citizens we propose an enhanced "senior circuit breaker" that makes it easier for homeowners to stay in their homes by taking advantage of an income tax credit.

We offer to reduce the cost of local government in order to help control rising property taxes. Towns, for example, are exempted from paying federal, but not state gasoline taxes. We support removing the state gasoline tax for municipal vehicles. A health insurance program with many members costs less than a small group, so we would authorize towns to follow Springfield's path and join the state health insurance program. We reform cumbersome public bidding requirements in order to save significant tax dollars. We also promise to send 40% of new state revenues to cities and towns.

We continue to support restoring the income tax rate to the voter-mandated 5% level. Until that happens, we offer a number of deductions and credits that taxpayers can choose instead of the standard deduction.

We propose initiatives to help employers cut through red tape and offer measures to help control their health insurance costs. We tackle environmental concerns by supporting incentives for "green" buildings in the public and private sector and provide tax-free treatment of many energy-saving items.

Some proposals are new; some have been debated before. We pledge our support to the legislative leadership and Governor Patrick in advancing them to law. We believe they will lead Toward a Better Massachusetts.