

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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House Budget Debate: Part 1

Next week will bring the longest five or six days in the legislative year as the house of representatives deals with the state budget for 2009, the fiscal year that begins in July. Here's the state of things as we approach Budget Week.

As usual, we are short of funds. Governor Patrick said his budget needed \$1.3 billion more than the revenue projections promise. The house ways and means chairman said he needed new taxes, budget cuts and money from the rainy day fund in order to balance the budget.

The hardship appeal is nothing new. For the past four years, the state's fiscal position has been presented as precarious. Yet each time the state ended its fiscal year with a substantial surplus. This year may be different. Money watchers in Boston caution that a general economic downturn threatens the revenue stream that we rely on to fund the budget. And recent instability in the mortgage and stock markets echo those cautions.

The legislature voted to raise taxes, but even with new revenues, the house budget is precariously balanced.

Where does that leave us? I said that budget week is the longest week of the legislative session because so many members sponsor so many amendments to increase spending and add to the bottom line. Though we had only a two-day window last week to file proposals, 1,500 amendments met that time limit and now await our action.

These are the factors: the economic future is uncertain, trending down; the budget relies on reserves to attain constitutionally required balance; the membership of the house wants to spend more.

When I was a new representative, the house considered amendments individually, with a certain amount of horse-trading between leaders and members. For example, the speaker might say, "You have 5 (or 10) amendments here. Which one is most important?" The majority would then be discarded. Even so, the debate was lively, and sessions ran late. I recall watching the sunrise in the midst of one endless session.

Over the years, however, we have become more efficient. So efficient, in fact, that the term "budget debate" seems overblown. Amendments will be grouped by subject matter and consolidated as a single super-amendment.

Members can pitch their ideas in a side meeting with the ways and means chairman, and they can withdraw a particular amendment from the batch and have it considered individually. We all understand, however, that no amendment is likely to pass without leadership support.

I will not see the sun come up during this year's sessions. After embarrassing late-night exhibitions several years ago on the house floor, we reformed the rules to state that unanimous consent of the members is required to meet beyond midnight.

I have received requests to support amendments adding between \$50,000 and \$50,000,000 to state spending for the coming year. Most of those amendments serve good causes. So far, I'm keeping my powder dry, working to preserve the balance between resources and needs that has kept Massachusetts performance sound in a fragile global economy.