

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Governor's Vetoes

The Budget is back! On Thursday, July 3rd, the legislature passed the budget for the fiscal year that began on July 1st, sent it to the governor, and left for the parades and festivities of Independence Day. Now it is back in the legislature as signed *and amended* by Governor Patrick.

I voted against the original budget on the belief that its 5.2% increase in spending is too risky, granting the current state of the economy. And it looks like the governor shares my concerns about our fiscal future. He vetoed \$122 million of the legislature's line items. Not only did he reduce the budget, but he also asked for legislative approval to expand his authority to impose mid-year reductions if our state revenues fail to meet current projections.

Here's a glance at the state of the budget as of the beginning of this week.

The governor took a full ten days to consider the budget before signing it. That means it's now in place as amended (We had already approved a temporary, two week extension of last year's appropriation to bridge the first days of the fiscal year). Now the legislature has the rest of this month to override those vetoes.

Last year the governor vetoed only \$41 million from the budget, and most of the items were restored through the override process. This year the legislature must fit all votes into the remaining two weeks of the month, and the precarious state of the economy might indicate that the legislature will be more cautious with overrides.

The governor's vetoes reduce higher education appropriations across the board, limiting them to his original recommendation. That's a reduction of several hundred thousand dollars for most institutions. The University of Massachusetts budget is cut by \$4 million, but its budget is so large that it's a smaller percentage than most other schools. District attorneys and sheriffs' departments are also marginally reduced.

The vetoes that will be most crucial to individual representatives are called either "pork" or "bacon," depending on whose opinion you seek. Springfield will suffer because the Basketball Hall of Fame lost \$150,000 for the Division II tournament, so that's bacon to those of us from Springfield. On the other hand, the loss of \$100,000 for the Chevalier auditorium in Medford is obviously pork unless you happen to be from Medford.

The house ways and means committee will undoubtedly recommend overriding various vetoes, and its aggressive or restrained actions will show how serious we are about dealing with changing times.

A supplemental budget to close out last year's spending accompanied the veto message. It contains some surprises.

In addition to the usual items of additional snow clearing and police overtime dollars, this year's deficiency budget increases both taxes and mandates.

Governor Patrick prepares for uncertain fiscal times by adding \$100 million to the state's rainy day fund, He also asks for expanded authority to make mid-year spending cuts in case revenues fall below expectations. Since our constitution requires a balanced budget, governors are required to cut line items if needed to retain that balance. The governor would like the authority to reduce local and school aid mid-year, a permanent law change that I will oppose. Our town relied on the state's promised assistance when we set our budget, and the state must keep its word.

Among his new costs, the governor adds assessments of millions of dollars on employers, health insurers and providers, all money directed to Commonwealth Care. That's called "shared responsibility." Gun license fees grow from \$100 to \$250, and a new \$100 annual gun dealer charge is proposed.

The new budget is currently in place unless and until vetoes are overridden by the legislature. The supplemental budget is just a proposal until the house and senate approve it. Stay tuned for the next two weeks to learn just how prudently Massachusetts will face this challenging new year.