

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Supplemental budget includes asbestos dollars

My subject in this week's column is not glamorous. It is not exciting, but it is a critical topic for any government, business or family in these recessionary times. That subject is the budget, with special emphasis on the line item in the state's budget dealing with asbestos removal in school buildings.

The House recently passed a supplemental budget for 1992, a package of appropriations to allow various departments to fund their activities through the end of June. Participating in the debate last month was a learning experience for me. I would like to share with you my impressions of the debate on this dry fiscal matter as an introduction to the coming legislative discussions for the 1993 budget.

The document that was presented by the Ways and Means Committee was straightforward in its additions of money for accounts such as Trial Courts and the Department of Mental Retardation, accounts that required the new appropriations. That is what one would expect from a budget document.

My learning experience began with the non-monetary sections of this budget. One section dealt with local Board of Health oversight to waste facilities. Another authorized and directed MassPort to run six weekday round trips between North and South Stations in Boston. The rationale for including such items in a budget bill is this - they bypass the cumbersome standard procedures for making laws in Massachusetts.

Then came the amendments! Debaters began referring to the Christmas tree nature of the document as legislators proposed funding of their personal projects. The exception I take with the Christmas tree designation is the item I mentioned at the beginning of this article, an amendment that fulfills a commitment to three municipalities in my legislative district. It is an appropriation to reimburse communities for school asbestos removal undertaken in the 1980's with the promise of state reimbursement.

Representatives from many affected communities backed the amendment, which will provide both Longmeadow and East Longmeadow with approximately \$250,000, and Springfield with more than \$1 million. The amendment was accepted by the House, and it has now been adopted by the Senate as well. The bill will be presented for Gov. Weld's signature after differences in the two versions are resolved.

Before its final passage, Thomas Finneran, Ways and Means Chairman, endorsed the fiscal soundness of the amended supplemental budget. In the same speech, he made the cautionary statement that bears repeating. The Massachusetts bond rating has stabilized since last year's brush with junk bond status, said Finneran, but it will not improve until Wall Street investors see a second year of belt-tightening in the budgetary process.

The construction of the 1993 budget over the next months will require stringency and self-discipline to produce improvement to the Massachusetts bond rating. I will work to provide the greatest benefit for the people of the district and the state within the existing framework of limited dollars.