

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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The year ends on a busy note - a very busy note!

Happy Holidays to all of you! I am writing this column in Boston, where the Statehouse tree and capitol Menorah are replacing the tree on the Green and the J.C.C. Menorah that have always been part of my celebration. The House and Senate are in the midst of our traditional Christmas schedule, a crush of deliberation of momentous legislation that has been sitting in various committees for much of the year.

The '92 session must end by Jan. 6, 1993, when a new legislature is sworn in. In these last weeks of business, we will consider court and education reform and economic development, with remote possibility of an auto insurance package also before us. I look forward to writing about landmark achievements in these areas once our session is over, but I will also caution everyone that the odds for substantial accomplishments are not guaranteed. This is how things stand right now.

Education reform has been a hot topic all year. School committees, teachers and parents have been anticipating substantial changes in the way Massachusetts educates our children. We had hopes for a reform bill last spring, but negotiations with the governor broke down. Local school budgets eventually received additional money, but no structural reform. We are trying again this week to achieve some meaningful changes, but according to Senate president William Bulger, it is unlikely the agreement can be reached in the next two weeks. Barring that, I will work for enactment early next year so the local educational plans and budget can consider the new law for the next school year.

We are also working for court reform, sometimes called an issue without a constituency. The state court system is an overburdened, understaffed division of government. A hiring freeze, antiquated filing systems and a burgeoning case load are causing a deepening crisis in our courtrooms while the legislation is unable to agree on remedial steps. The House this year passed a reform bill that now sits in the Senate. There is sufficient time if we have the necessary will to provide some relief to the courts.

When Gov. Weld's comprehensive economic development plan was finally presented to the House last week, most of the substance had been removed by the Ways and Means Committee. I offered amendments to strengthen the development potential, as did other Republican members. The House adopted some amendments, and the fate of this bill is still unsettled. Members who share my interest in encouraging business investment in Massachusetts feel the bill is too weak, while the Democratic leadership believes we cannot afford a more aggressive package.

Auto insurance reform remains a high priority with every licensed driver, particularly as new bills arrive in our mailboxes at this time of the year. Legislative attempts to lower our bills seem so far from enactment that I will not try to predict an outcome this year.

Inactivity and uncertainty are frustrating to me as I know they are to you. Our inaction makes an effective argument for a shorter calendar for the Legislature, and such a bill has been proposed by the Republican minority, but we have not acted on that either. Maybe next year!