

Beacon Hill Byline - By Mary Rogeness

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House passes a budget for FY '94

How do you forge agreement on the details of a \$15 billion budget among 160 lawmakers? You keep them in session until they agree on the bottom line. That is the method adopted by leaders of the Massachusetts House of Representatives, and I must agree that it has proven to be an effective way to produce consensus. Members worked all week, and we were able to spend Memorial Day weekend at home after passing the budget at 4:15 a.m. Saturday. Here is a summary of that budget debate.

Tom Finneran, chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, presented the House with a 15.4 billion dollar budget that squeezed accounts hard. He stated and reemphasized to the membership that the commonwealth has no more money to spend. It has taken House members a few years to realize that extra money is not available. Throughout the week members made speeches and wrangled about non-budgetary "outside sections," but our acceptance of the reality of limited funds helped limit our debate.

Funding highlights of the budget include a 4-percent increase in funding for higher education, the second annual increase after several years of budget cuts. Early retirement for higher education workers, the only state employees not previously granted that option, was also approved. Public schools receive the same funding as last year. The budget tightness continued to dictate a freeze for low income housing vouchers, and the House approved only a limited, \$50 clothing allowance for AF'DC children.

I presented one modest amendment requesting the addition of \$30,000 to the budget to fund CASA, a juvenile court program in Springfield. Boston has an equivalent program funded by the state, and I was pleased that the House accepted my amendment providing equal treatment for Hampden County. I cosponsored amendments to add funding to the anti-smoking programs backed by the new cigarette tax. The House approved an addition of \$6 million for a media campaign while rejecting two other proposals. I have promised to expend the cigarette tax monies for the purpose designated by the voters last November, and I will continue to work with the American Cancer Society to fulfill this goal.

One flaw in the budget is the omission of funding for education reform. That funding is missing because we debated the budget before enacting the reform bill, although it was released by the House on the same day we convened for our budget debate. We knew that once we passed the bill we would have an unfunded obligation for \$175 this fiscal year. Nevertheless, we did not cut other accounts to designate money for the reform. The education bill has now passed both houses, with a section directing Gov. Weld to find money to fund it. The governor says he can do that, and we will be watching for his suggestions.

The budget now goes to the Senate for action later in June. Watch with me to see if Massachusetts can continue our recent pattern of facing the future while living within our means.