

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Legislating the Massachusetts Highways

This year's state budget has been approved in record time. In this year when the New York budget was months late, ours was passed to be enacted on June 30, the day before it took effect. It is balanced; it funds education fully and increases local aid. Beyond the budget, however, lies one part of state financial obligation that has not been adequately addressed by the entire legislature -- funding for state roads. I am working to retrieve this law from the limbo where it has landed.

Road projects throughout Massachusetts are funded through a bonding process because they are capital projects appropriately paid for over several years. Governor Weld presented a transportation bond to the legislature last November, and different legislative committees have been processing it over the intervening months. The first sign of delay for the authorization came in the early spring when the house transportation committee had not acted on the bill. Then, over members' objections, the House debated the budget before taking up the bond. It is now been separated into three different bills, all in various stages of the legislative process.

The first bill, the Emergency Capital Projects Bond, funds Chapter 90 that provides road maintenance for cities and towns. It was passed by both houses of the legislature, but has sat stalled in conference committee since June 21. Every municipality in the commonwealth is awaiting its passage, and every citizen knows of a street that demands its funding.

The second bill funds projects on state highways. It has been held up in the senate ways and means committee since June 13. The house has approved it, construction workers need it and the infrastructure demands it. The Longmeadow Street project is dependent on its passage. Bids have been opened on the Longmeadow project and, for the first time, the highway department has awarded contracts here and elsewhere subject to appropriation. That means that roadwork can begin immediately once the bill is enacted, but first Senator Birmingham must report the bill to the full senate.

The third transportation bill deals with turnpike issues, and it is less time-sensitive than the other two. We hoped to expedite legislative action on local projects by removing the politics of the turnpike. Necessary road projects must be completed before winter weather closes down the road construction season, yet here we sit in July, still waiting for the first dollar of authorization.

Many area roads need repairs right now, not next year. And the construction workers need their jobs right now, not next December. House and senate leaders are refusing to finalize deliberations, leading to the inescapable belief that partisan politics in this gubernatorial election year are interfering with the welfare of many residents of the state. I will continue to work to provide that money. You can help by letting your senators know that you want the transportation bond to be passed right now.