

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Hail and Farewell

Massachusetts often has the longest legislative session of any state, and in 1994 we have retained this distinction. The Senate and the House both labored well into the night of December 28, finishing business after 1:00 a.m. on the 29th. The two bodies met again briefly on January 3 to tie up the remaining loose ends. We finished just in time for the newly elected legislators to be sworn in on Wednesday, January 4.

The year was marked by innovation and promise, but also with the companions of frustration and delay. These are the accomplishments and works in progress of the Massachusetts legislature in 1994.

The budget was the early focus of both the governor and the legislature, and we again produced a balanced budget. Not only do we have the constitutionally required pro forma balanced budget, but the current budget is “structurally balanced.” It does not rely on one-time income (such as sale of state property) or accounting sleight of hand to attain the bottom line.

One disappointment in the budget was a flawed welfare measure, an attempt to change the system that would invite fraud and increase costs. Gov. Weld exercised his line-item veto to prevent that section from becoming law, and in the last days of December that the veto was finally sustained. Circumstances behind the veto mean that next month the state will run out of welfare funds, putting that item at the top of our agenda for 1995.

The transportation bond has been a mixed blessing for many cities and towns, for Longmeadow as much as anyone. The bill should have become law early in 1994, but it was delayed because road repairs became linked with a stadium and convention center in Boston. The bond was finally passed in segments, and the Megaplex is not yet decided. The bill authorizing Longmeadow Street resurfacing passed in August and, although we had hoped to finish the resurfacing before winter, the contractor deferred the job until spring rather than risk an unfinished road when cold weather arrived. I know I speak for all of us when I say the prospect of spring is heightened by the hope of smooth driving on Route 5.

As the legislative year came to a close, we saw a cluster of actions that will improve the business climate in Massachusetts. They are not glamorous items, but individually and as a group they will help our economy. We set a lower rate for unemployment insurance, a cost paid by employers. We saw the benefits of workers compensation reform when providers requested a rate reduction over 10%. We delayed the implementation of a universal health insurance mandate for employers, and we changed the capital gains tax to encourage investment in Massachusetts.

And now we will begin again. New people 30 newly elected House members were sworn in yesterday. New bills— 5,000 are expected to be filed. New hopes for ending welfare dependency, providing health care to the uninsured and moving Massachusetts forward toward a prosperous 21st century.