

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Budget Time is Back!

“Interregnum.” That is the word on the cover of this year’s state budget developed by our House ways and means committee. The word is printed in the format of a dictionary entry with this accompanying definition.

1: a period during which the normal functions of government or control are held in abeyance 2: a lapse or pause in a continuous series.

The word describes the precarious fiscal condition of Massachusetts and sets the tone for the 300 page document that outlines the budget for the fiscal year of 1996. The House of Representatives is debating the budget this week.

The budget provides another step in the commonwealth’s return to financial good health. We are still paying the price for the free spending habits of the ‘80s through the interest payments on state borrowing. We are facing a downturn in state revenue because of a general economic downturn. Regardless, we must continue to balance our books to improve the Massachusetts bond rating.

The \$16.8 billion budget presented by our ways and means committee represents an increase of five percent over last year. Here are some of the new expenditures our committee has been able to approve with the limited available funds.

Education funding. The education reform act of 1993 built in a complex formula of annual increases to local school systems. This year’s new funding of \$185 million strays from that formula by removing an inflation factor. The change takes away different amounts from some districts, but it does not affect Longmeadow’s funding at all.

Lottery distribution. Local aid from lottery income is increased by \$45 million throughout the state, retaining a formula of growth that was introduced last year. For Longmeadow, that means an increase of \$80,000.

Welfare reform. The budget includes additional funding for administration of the changing welfare system, new day care vouchers and funding for several programs to prevent teen pregnancy. These expenditures should all aid our state in shifting from traditional welfare to the concept of transitional assistance.

I have talked about what is funded. Of course, there are many unmet needs in the budget. We are spending the week trying to juggle those elusive dollars to satisfy as many of those needs as possible. School building funds, including the Center School project, is at the top of my list. New money for public defenders, daycare workers and the direct care workers in group homes are other priorities.

The whole budget process is a little like a baseball game. The first pitch was thrown out in January as House 1, the Governor’s budget. We are in the fourth inning as the house debates House 5000, our version of that spending document. Then the senate will have its turn. The eighth inning will be the conference committee that irons out differences in the two documents, and the ninth will be Gov. Weld’s signature to the act that takes Massachusetts one year closer to the end of the interregnum.