

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

December 28, 1995

What Does Downsizing Government Mean?

Last fall, Governor Weld came to Springfield to announce his plans to downsize government. Displaying a large rubbish barrel filled to overflowing with volumes of state regulations, he demonstrated that bureaucrats have taken too much power over us. He then proposed to sweep away many of those regulations. Here is some of the detail behind that public announcement.

He quickly attracted our attention when he talked of eliminating the Registry of Motor Vehicles. That idea has a substantial appeal if you have had an unpleasant experience while registering a vehicle or licensing ourselves, but I doubt that the Registry will be destroyed. A more likely scenario is that improvements such as mall locations for drivers licenses will expand. Technologies such as digital photographs will facilitate obtaining licenses. Our visits to the Registry will be minimized but, like it or not, the cross-checking of unpaid parking tickets and excise bills will probably remain a function of the Registry.

Another proposal involves changes in the funding of higher education. The university campuses, state and community colleges are funded with their own line items in the state budget. According to the downsizing proposal, the Higher Education Coordinating Council would gain the control of funding, thereby gaining the clout to demand and reward educational performance at institutions.

Middle managers of state agencies will be given new discretion to apply their budgets as they see fit. The application of modern management techniques to empower government workers in accomplishing their mission should provide marked improvement to the delivery of services.

An important efficiency will result from changes to our public bidding process. I learned of the difficulties first hand while serving on the Longmeadow School Committee. An extensive, time-consuming and cumbersome state law makes it extremely difficult to initiate any public building project. The public bidding requirements, enacted 30 years ago with the best intentions, have become a hurdle that should be removed.

County government would be eliminated except for corrections. Counties have been eliminated in our neighboring state of Connecticut, and many traditional functions are already centralized at the state level. Formalizing that consolidation will remove one level of red tape.

Demonstrating that he is willing to impose the changes on his own advisers, Gov. Weld will reorganize the executive branch of government, combining and reassigning cabinet functions. Elimination of those books of regulations should come from some of the self-assessments that accompany those changes.

All private businesses have analyzed their operations, looking for ways to cut costs and improve operations. Government is more likely to retain familiar patterns established in books of regulations. It is my hope that Massachusetts government agencies will respond to marketplace standard, change the way they operate and deliver services for ourselves and our children.