

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

January 19, 1996

Off and Running on Beacon Hill

This year marks a new beginning for the Massachusetts legislature. For the first time we have adopted the Congressional calendar for legislation. A bill that was filed last year, the first year of the two year session, is still active in the second year. We have eliminated all of the paperwork of refileing, renumbering and reconsidering each bill from scratch.

The House of Representatives convened in Boston on January 3 to open the 1996 legislative year. That first meeting is required by the constitution to take place the first Wednesday of each year. Otherwise, we would have delayed the session because our first January snowstorm arrived that day, making travel nearly impossible. As it was, the House completed the ceremonial paperwork to open the session and adjourned to another day.

Our second session was another ceremonial event. Governor Weld made his State of the State address to a joint meeting of the House and the Senate. He reviewed his administration's record and outlined his plans for the next year. He also gave subtle indications about issues in the coming senatorial campaign. Next we will get his budget, but we have several items of business to complete before we act on that document.

Two bond issues are scheduled to have first priority, addressing transportation needs and prison space shortages. Bond bills have progressed slowly through the legislature because we are concerned about our state's credit rating on Wall Street. But infrastructure needs and a severe shortage of prison beds have made the issues a high priority in the new year. Incidentally, Springfield has an interest in a provision in the transportation bond that funds riverfront development.

Another bill that is receiving attention is a new health care mandate for employers. Dubbed the Minimum Wage Health Care bill, it is offered as an alternative to the law enacted under Governor Dukakis. It is well-intentioned, but imposes substantial costs on our smallest employers. I am eager to debate the bill because of my concerns about those expenses. The Democrat leadership of both houses has spoken in favor of the bill, and I want to find out if the legislature will amend it in order both provide health care to more citizens and to retain our commitment to the future of small business.

The most important financial bill will come up very soon. Compared to the \$2 billion transportation bond it is small, but it is critically important to every town official in the commonwealth. Each municipality in Massachusetts has overspent its snow removal budget, and the legislature will consider an appropriation of \$25 million to refill town coffers. Once we provide that money, we will really be off and running on the business of governing the people.