

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Technology in the Commonwealth

If you have a home computer you have experienced the mixed blessing of efficiency and new expense. Because of the high cost to implement changes and the reluctance to innovate, our state has moved slowly into the electronic era, but we are now ready to take a quantum leap. The legislature just authorized a capital outlay of \$176,000,000 to fund more than forty state government information technology initiatives.

You may have benefited from some innovations already. The Department of Revenue offers a case in point. It has installed a telephone tax filing system that enables a taxpayer to complete filing a tax return by pushing the buttons on a touch-tone phone. The refund check is in the mail within four days. Multiplying the handling and data entry cost savings by thousands of tax returns, you quickly realize that the state benefits as much as the taxpayer. This particular innovation earned Massachusetts a national award from the National Council of State Legislatures.

These are some of the other projects that will be funded by the technology bond.

A \$530 million expenditure will fund an electronic commerce system at the Comptroller's office. Combining with significant federal funds, it allows the state to convert from paper checks to electronic transfers. State purchase orders, contracts and payments to vendors will all be affected. The thousands of checks that are mailed weekly have an average cost of 40 cents while an electronic funds transfer (EFT) costs 12 cents. Human services will expand \$5 million for Health and Human Services Systems Integration Architecture (HSIA). This system will unify records of services and benefits through a central agency. Most public assistance recipients require the services of multiple agencies, and the new system will consolidate data across many case management systems. Caseworkers from one agency can then determine eligibility or enrollment for other state services directly from their own system.

Improved delivery and security of welfare and food stamp benefits will be another aspect of the new technology. Electronic transfer of such benefits has been successfully piloted in several other states.

With the end of the Massachusetts miracle, our state government adopted standards of the private sector to assume responsibility for producing the highest return on our capital investments. In the information age, that means utilizing the technology that is available to us. Human service clients benefit from consolidation of operations, and contractors benefit from payment efficiencies. Taxpayers are the biggest winners of all as the cost-cutting efficiencies are incorporated in government operations.