

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Sizing up the Legislative Session

Reports are coming in from newspaper editorials, television and even the radio talk shows: the legislature had a productive year. We are even demonstrating that we can proceed with the people's business in the remaining days of our session when our rules prohibit us from taking recorded votes.

Here are some of the achievements of the 1996 legislative year.

As the year opened, longtime senate president William Bulger had just departed to assume the presidency of the University of Massachusetts. So the senate opened for business with a new president, Tom Birmingham, and a new slate of leaders. The house then followed suit by electing Tom Finneran as our new speaker in April. The balanced budget, for the sixth consecutive year, was the first accomplishment under the new joint leadership.

Using the two year schedule to full advantage, several important laws were enacted in the current session. We changed the state's tax policy relating to financial services in order to retain and strengthen those aspects of the economy. If we continue to develop measures to help the state's business, we may convert the "Taxachusetts" label to the junk heap of history.

We enacted a bill to save our employers costs on their unemployment insurance, but amendments with costly mandates for localities caused the governor to veto it. An improving economy has provided the state's unemployment fund with a substantial nest egg to meet costs from any unexpected downturn in employment, and we will continue to address that issue.

We enacted health insurance legislation to broaden the availability of health coverage to children and the elderly. We have also introduced new provisions to make health insurance more readily available to individual purchasers. Our experience will be a test case for other states and the nation as we experiment with expanded coverages.

We passed a river protection bill that strives to protect both our water supply and the rights of property owners. That bill engendered emotional debate, with legislators decrying such calamities as the sewage overflow that polluted the Charles River this summer. A reality check shows that the portion of the Charles that was affected is exempt from the new law, as are most of the densely developed urban areas in the state. I hope the new law will enhance the quality of our rivers.

The legislature has now moved into informal sessions for the rest of the year. We continue to deal with legislation, but teamwork and respect for others is more important in that forum. By learning to use the rules, and with the cooperation of all members, we are addressing one issue that first seemed insoluble - the Hall of Fame. A bill is working its way through both houses of the legislature that authorizes the Massachusetts Land Bank to provide funds for renovations to the Hall. We will need a recorded vote before the money can be accessed, but the intent of the legislature will be on the books.

It has been a good year.