

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Inviting L.L. Bean to Springfield

A close friend asked me last week what was going on with L.L. Bean and Springfield's riverfront. At that point, I realized that the rest of the town is not as familiar as I am with the attempts to find a home in Springfield for the famous catalog retailer. At that point I decided to write about it for this week's column.

The arrival of a new retail anchor in our city is moving rapidly from the realm of the possible to the probable. This is what has been happening to facilitate that arrival.

Everybody knows the famous catalog company of L.L. Bean, and we all know it is based in Maine. By Massachusetts law, if the company opens an outlet in Massachusetts, all sales to Massachusetts customers will be taxed. Transactions that are presently tax-free would suddenly lose that status simple because of the Springfield store.

The company has expressed an interest in obtaining a Springfield presence. It is drawn to our riverfront location that fits well with the L.L. Bean product mix, but it feels the tax consequences are too high a price to pay for a new location.

The Hall of Fame is working to develop a commercial center along the riverfront, and that center needs an anchor attraction to draw travelers from the Interstate. The presence of L.L. Bean in the center important enough for the retailer, the Hall of Fame and area legislators to work together to change the restrictive law.

Arguments have been put forth both for and against such a change. Opponents cite the possibility of a slippery slope. If we do it for L.L. Bean, then we will have to do it for everybody. Supporters see it as a win-win situation. The city will gain from increased property value. The state will gain tax revenue from all sales in the Springfield store. Catalog sales have not been taxed in the past, so they do not represent a loss of revenue. The success of a new shopping and tourism center in our region will bring permanent jobs to the area and economic spin-offs that will benefit everybody.

All of the arguments have been made on both sides. Fine points have been negotiated, and the bill is now on the brink of enactment into law. The final passage should take place in the senate this week, and it should be heading to the governor's desk as you read this. The senate must approve the bill one last time, so the possibility of a further delay remains. However, with the Hall of Fame directors scheduled to meet this week and with the established record of solid local support, the riverfront center should be another step closer to reality.

Springfield will gain another step on the comeback trail. And we will another step closer to erasing the state's nickname of "Taxachusetts" from modern history.