

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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State of the State: Part I

Speaker Finneran first talked about giving a formal speech at the opening session of the House of Representatives, and people were surprised. Such an address, laying out priorities of the government for the year, has historically been the responsibility of the governor. When you think about it, however, it is appropriate for our chief legislator to discuss his priorities. His party controls the lawmaking agenda, so his philosophy is critical to the direction of the entire state. That address, given last week, made the following points.

Economic development is critical to a prosperous future in Massachusetts. In order to foster that development, Speaker Finneran advocated cutting unemployment insurance rates, enacting laws to promote job growth and enhancing our educational reforms. He also spoke of making it possible for businesses to utilize the state's old industrial sites. Cleaning up these "brownfields" will reduce development pressures on our limited open space.

The speaker devoted some attention to an orderly budget process, one of his proudest achievements in his tenure as chairman of the ways and means committee. It will mean a solid week of tedious floor debate, but the house will pass the budget in mid-April. The document will then go to the senate in time to allow Massachusetts to begin the fiscal year with the budget firmly in place. He sounded a cautionary note about the limits of that budget. Boston sports promoters talk about using state funds for the Patriots or the Red Sox, just as we in Springfield seek to use state money for a minor league ball park. From the speaker's remarks, neither city should plan on state support for such an enterprise.

On the environmental front, Finneran praised our passage last year of the Rivers Protection Act and advocated a state appropriation that will provide Massachusetts with access to federal clean drinking water monies. Public safety drew the speaker's attention as he called for a new look at the effectiveness and possible retargeting of mandatory sentencing laws. Social service initiatives to reduce childhood hunger and promote healthy babies were mentioned. Finneran advocates a program of newborn home visitation that has been used effectively in Hawaii to reduce child abuse and neglect.

Summarizing a twelve point speech in this space makes for some heavy reading, but it seems important to share the flavor of our newly organized legislature. As I listened, a member of the loyal opposition to our Democrat speaker, I was pleasantly surprised at the extent to which I agreed with his statements. I will write my next column about Governor Weld's State of the State speech. I have not heard it yet, but I will make this prediction about it. The Republican governor and the Democrat speaker will have very similar agendas for Massachusetts. The combination will make a productive year that benefits us all.