

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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House of Representatives produces another on-time budget

The Massachusetts legislature has made such a practice of passing timely budgets that I have almost forgotten the old days of the eighties, the times when it was expected that we would begin each fiscal year without having a budget for the state. Now that timely budgets are routine, the house of representatives added another innovation this year. Our debates did not last all night; they did not even extend beyond 10 p.m. We finished last Thursday after four days of negotiating, debating and voting.

The first issue of debate came even before the initial scheduled house budgetary session. Speaker Finneran proposed to institute a rule that would strictly limit the scope of amendments that could be considered. The budget has long been an instrument for enacting varied measures with little if any relation to state spending, so this restriction caused an uproar, led by the Republican minority leader and supported by many in the majority party. The rule was withdrawn before it was adopted, and the only limit was by the calendar – amendments had to be submitted the Friday before the budget debate. To understand the importance of that limitation, you need only to know that 875 amendments were drafted by that deadline.

After all was said and done, this is what our budget looks like.

First the big ticket items. Education reform was fully funded, pumping another \$260 million into local school systems as promised by the 1993 education reform law. Local aid is increased according to a five-year plan that phases out the state's past practice of claiming lottery receipts.

Republicans had fought to open up debate in order to introduce the several tax cut proposals in Governor Weld's budget but omitted by the house. Each tax cut was addressed early in the week, and each in turn was sent to a "study commission" to determine its effects on the finances of Massachusetts. Such proposals as an increase in the child care deduction, unearned income tax rates and tax cuts for targeted businesses were therefore taken off the table. I fought in vain to include them in our spending plan, and now I will use my position on the taxation committee to enact them in another form.

Most of the phone calls during the week came from retirees or human service workers whose incomes depend on our state budget. State pensions were not adjusted in the budget, but a COLA bill is advancing as a separate legislative item. Direct care workers were allotted \$14 million in new funding, a large amount that unfortunately does not go far in addressing the wage scale for the large work force. It is an issue of continuing concern to me. After all was said and done, the budget was adopted by a unanimous vote.

The House received a budget document from Governor Weld in January. We adapted that instrument in consideration of our priorities and now send it along to the Senate. We are now halfway to achieving our seventh consecutive timely, balanced budget.