

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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### **State House Schedules**

Lame Duck Session. Midnight Vote. Halloween Surprise. These words have been headlines to describe legislative action that sometimes take place out of the full view of the public. They describe the activities that damage the reputations of lawmakers, activities that the Massachusetts legislature is striving to eliminate. Here are some of the measures we have taken at the State House.

This week leads up to the house debate on next year's budget. Since budget week is a time of intense activity and long hours of work, this seems like an appropriate time to discuss some of the rules that will keep our debate open to the public.

The "lame duck" issue was addressed after a public disapproval of a salary increase adopted in the fall of 1994. In 1995, we changed the joint rules to prohibit consideration of controversial issues by either the house or senate after July of an election year. In non-election years, we continue to vote on issues through mid-November.

The issue of secretive activity is more complex. A first method of reducing secrecy was the addition of cable television to the house chamber. The television cameras added a strong measure of accountability to our actions. Just as local government changed when school committee and selectmen's meetings were televised, legislative sessions became more formal when video came to the State House. The documentation of videotaped records ensures more responsible actions.

Boston television carries full airing of sessions though Longmeadow cable shares the air time with other cable programs. Where cable television does not transmit legislative proceedings, house rules come into play to encourage responsibility.

There has long been a House rule that no session can extend later than 10:00 p.m. There is, however, an escape hatch; if a majority agrees, the rule can be suspended. When I first became a legislator, suspension of the rule was automatic. Under Speaker Finneran the rule is generally observed.

When the clock approaches the hour of ten, members wait to see if we will adjourn or be asked to vote to continue the session. I generally vote to end the session. Late night sessions may add drama to a debate but they also produce exhaustion in legislators. It has seemed like that exhaustion has been used as a tool to bring debate to a close.

You can evaluate the accuracy of the explanation of legislative scheduling next week. The house will complete our debate of the budget for fiscal year 1999. Preliminary debate limits have already established through the adoption of an early deadline for submission of amendments. Speaker Finneran has expressed his intention to conduct activities during the business day. And just in case, those 10 p.m. adjournment rules are suspended, I have made plans to stay in Boston for the week.