

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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### **One more budget step completed**

The Massachusetts budget for the fiscal year that begins on July has moved another step closer to completion. As expected, The House of Representatives completed our debate on the budget the week before last. The debate began on Monday morning and ended with engrossment of The 400 page fiscal document at 11:30 Thursday night.

The budget as presented to The House had already addressed many priorities of members. The school aid to Longmeadow was increased by a third; it will be \$100 per student. Lottery aid is again increased as we continue to phase out a cap on lottery distribution. We increased funding for social service workers salaries. Tax proposals to cut both ordinary and investment income tax rates to 5.7 percent are also in the budget.

What did we debate all week? It was not the text as developed by our Ways and Means Committee. It was the amendments that our 158 members proposed. With an early deadline for submission of amendments, the number was capped at just fewer than 1,000. Many amendments dealt with local issues. For example, Gale Candaras and I asked for funding to sustain The House Information Center (rejected). Others proposed additional funding for statewide programs such as child welfare and home care services for the elderly (rejected with the promise of later consideration). When we finished, over half of the amendments had been withdrawn. Some 250 were adopted and the remainder rejected.

One amendment is of particular importance to Longmeadow. It changes the town's pension liability in a manner that will save \$530,000 in the town budget next year. The abolition of Hampden County threatened to increase each costs to members of the county retirement system by as much as 40 percent until The house accepted an amendment that I co-sponsored with Dan Keenan of Agawam.

Another amendment will be important to any employer in Massachusetts. It reduces next year's unemployment tax schedule, providing a savings of \$90 per employee per year. The unemployment tax has been a nagging cost for Massachusetts. Raised in the recession years, we have struggled to reduce the levy now that the economy is strong and the reserve fund contains more than \$1 billion.

Republicans attempted to reduce taxes, but were rebuffed on most votes. One surprise amendment provides a tax credit along with improved safety for gun owners. The house accepted by unanimous vote a Republican proposal to provide tax credits for the full cost of trigger lock mechanisms. The amendment provides an incentive for gun owners to secure their firearms by removing the cost of security devices. The cost to the state will be minimal and the enhanced safety immeasurable.

I have written about some highlights in the House budget, and now I must state this caveat: The budget is not yet law. Both the governor and the House have had their say on the state's fiscal priorities, and next it will be the senate's turn. Senate hearings have been held throughout the state, the Ways and Means Committee is working to assemble the document that expresses the priorities of that body. Only after each body has passed a budget, a conference committee has ironed out differences between the two and Governor Cellucci has signed the bill into law will we have a state budget.