

Beacon Hill Byline, by Mary Rogeness

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Working All Night

It's a story that keeps coming back - the all-night session of the House of Representatives. Our budget debate covered important subjects, authorizing nearly \$22 billion to fund state operations in the coming year. An enhanced retirement package for public school teachers was approved as a separate bill. Yet all of the provisions of the annual state budget combined received less attention in the press than the wrap-up all night session.

If you would like the first hand report from an eyewitness, read on.

Let me set the scene. The budget debate started on Monday, and it was still in progress by Thursday night. Of the 1400 amendments, several hundred had not been processed. It was the week before school vacation, and some members had plans to leave town on Friday with their families.

House leadership had its own interest in working late. Amendments that members file with the sure conviction of the importance seem much less critical as the hour grows late. It is much easier for house leadership to reject an amendment at 3:00 a.m. than at 3:00 p.m. These factors all contributed to members' wishes to finish the debate ASAP.

So we worked late, in spite of the roadblock presented by the house rules. A rule adopted years ago as a reform measure prohibits the house from working past 10:00 p.m. That hindrance was quickly overcome by a vote to suspend the rule. Republicans voted to recess until Friday morning. But the vast majority of members voted to work through the night.

Let me describe the atmosphere in the house chambers as the hour grew later. Several amendments required roll call votes, but between midnight and 6:00 a.m., amendments were added or rejected through negotiation. The press talked parties in some legislative offices and complained that members were napping. I saw, no irresponsible activity, but rumors are hard to refute once the stories begin to circulate. People were certainly falling asleep, but from what I saw they were present when called on to manage the issues of their constituents.

The bottom line is this: business should not be conducted late at night. Legislators have long known this; that is why it is prohibited by the rules. Now we have a newly appointed select committee to tell us how to avoid repeat performances. My prediction is that a new rule will require a higher level of member endorsement before the house can suspend the rule against late night sessions. And we will be reluctant to suspend that particular rule until the memory of the 2001 annual budget debate fades from memory. Then the process will begin all over again.