

Beacon Hill Byline By Rep. Mary Rogeness

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Beating back the Deficit

Only a few weeks ago Boston was the site of celebrations. First Night, swearing in the legislature and governor, the inaugural ball. Last week the city had an entirely different atmosphere as it faced both the cold winter and the harsh reality of the Massachusetts budget.

Tax revenues are not meeting projections, so the state budget is out of balance. And the constitution requires that the budget must be balanced by the end of June. Governor Romney asked the legislature to expand his authority to cut expenditures to achieve that balance. The expansion would allow him to reduce local aid payments to cities and towns, requiring all municipalities to reduce their spending in the middle of their fiscal year.

Since the governor made his request, I have had meetings, phone calls and e-mails from many constituents. Human service workers, whose budgets are subject to reduction with existing executive authority, are relieved that they may not have to bear the full burden of cuts. Municipal advocates initially asked me to vote against expanding the governor's authority, but when that authority seemed assured, their requests diverged. Springfield teachers or city residents asked me to vote to limit the percentage of cuts to the city. Parents and other town residents pleaded to require cuts in the same percentage for all communities.

Any vote I made or any action the legislature took could not satisfy all of those who have asked for my support. I used my best judgment in determining how Massachusetts can make it to the end of June with minimal hardship to the state. Here is a summary and an explanation of those actions.

I voted with a strong majority to grant new authority to the governor. Last year's experience with a similar budget shortfall made that vote easier. The legislature has the authority to revise the budget, but it does not have the will. At this time last year, we chose to rely on the "rainy day" fund rather than cutting expenses. That drained \$1.8 billion from our reserves, leaving them nearly depleted. Last summer we passed an out-of-balance budget, so Gov. Swift used her line item veto to reduce the bottom line. Then the legislature then overrode vetoes to restore many expenses.

The House of Representatives voted to make all reductions proportional as town advocates requested. The senate allowed differentials to different communities, and the senate provisions prevailed in the final bill. Gov. Romney is now authorized to reduce the budget by as much as \$600 million, taking one third of reductions from local aid.

As a Longmeadow resident, I can't help feeling that our town may be asked to compensate for the urban centers whose budgets are largely funded by the state. Boston has added massive state-subsidized spending in the '90s while Longmeadow has continued to pay our own way. I will work to see that "my" towns do not bear Boston's share of the reductions.

No family, company or town finds it easy to downsize a budget in mid-cycle. Knowing this, the governor has offered to help municipalities gain relief from state mandates. He assigned Lieutenant Governor Healey to work with mayors and selectmen to identify such items. Our state has a well-earned reputation for setting up roadblocks. For example, it requires an elaborate bidding process for any contract in excess of \$25,000. Streamlining some of those processes will save towns money well beyond any present crisis.

No legislator wishes to begin the year facing this crisis. No governor wants to spend his first days in office as Gov. Romney did, facing 300 municipal officials to tell them he wants some of the state's money back. He took that responsibility, and now has unilateral authority for the remainder of this fiscal year. It returns to the legislature on June 30, when I hope the lessons of January will provide guidance for July.