

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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The times they are a changing

Last week Governor Romney released his budget for the state's fiscal year that begins July 1. On releasing the new document, he said he loves the challenge of turning around a troubled organization – like Massachusetts.

He has taken on that turnaround with all his energy, producing a budget with a bottom line the same as last year. Fixed costs have increased during the year, which means it is a much smaller budget. Some state workers have already lost their jobs as a result of midyear staff reductions, and other job losses will come from the new plan. It has massive reorganizations of some departments, elimination of others and reductions for almost everyone who deals with state programs.

Change is the watchword of the new budget. These are some of the major changes proposed for the coming year.

Higher education is reorganized with UMass Amherst to be identified as the stand-alone research University of Massachusetts. Other schools are joined for some administrative and operational functions, with Greenfield and Holyoke Community Colleges merged.

Social service delivery will undergo a complete restructuring, with client categories becoming a dominant factor in delivery. If a child needs services, those services will be delivered through one contact. In contrast, the present system can have several distinct points of access and different bureaucracies that can work at cross-purposes. Human service providers have shared with me their frustration with the existing system. The system spends more than the neighboring state of Connecticut for every client, yet cannot pay a competitive wage to the front line workers.

The court system will be restructured to deliver services that better meet the needs of the courts throughout the state, with some courts facing elimination. Springfield's courts are historically understaffed, so courthouse workers anticipate improvement in their operations, while the comparatively well funded Boston Municipal Court stands to lose assets.

Local aid, first reduced last month from this year's budget, has again been cut. No community has a reduction greater than 10.5% of the current year's (reduced) local aid. Some communities are slated to receive increased state aid, but Longmeadow is not among them. Our town is slated to have the 10.5% cut. I am working with the town and with all communities I represent to fully understand the fine points of the new local aid formula. The governor has stated that chapter 766 special education funding will be increased, a benefit that will moderate the effects of a substantial change in other funding.

This has been a brief summary of several aspects of the budget. You can tell that Governor Romney is not planning to continue "business as usual." The response from the public has been generally favorable when individuals see a reining in of state excesses.

Change, however, is always easier when we are asking other people to change their way of doing business. It is another matter entirely when we ourselves face the requirement to work differently. Some individuals face the requirement to work differently. Some individuals have written or spoken to me of their support of the budget. Others say the change is needed, but not for their item. And some believe we should just tax our way through this fiscal crisis, though it would require an income tax nearly 8% to fund programs at last year's level.

Some of the changes will improve state government; many are proposed only because of revenue shortfalls. The entire budget is only the first step in the legislative process, which will now move to the house of representatives and then to the senate. Some of the governor's ideas will be rejected, others embraced. Any cost savings that are eliminated from the final document, however, must be made up with other reductions or new taxes. Please let me know your priorities for state spending at mary@rogeness.com.