

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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May Day: Massachusetts Legislators facing reality of State's finances

The first day of May has been a special day to different people for a variety of reasons over the years. To the Soviets it meant huge parades that showcased their military might as they celebrated International Labor Day. To the American law community it has come to be known as Law Day, a commemoration noted annually in Springfield through efforts of District Attorney, William Bennett. May Day still symbolized to me the childhood making of May baskets and leaving them, flower-filled, at the doorsteps of favorite neighbors. It was a favorite day of the season.

This year, however, still one other meaning is more in keeping with how I am spending this May Day. Mayday is the distress call of ships or planes, and Mayday could explain the stress the whole legislature is dealing with as we face the reality of our state's finances. The house of representatives started our budget debate yesterday, and we will spend the next week stretching dollars to cover as many spending priorities as possible.

Here is a sample of the issues ahead of us.

The state would need an additional \$3 billion in revenue to continue this year's expenditures into the next budget year. The house budget presented by the ways and means committee does not raise taxes. It addresses the need by imposing new fees to generate revenue, cutting local aid, restructuring many Medicaid programs and restricting or eliminating other state services. And members have filed 1,023 amendments to "perfect" the budget.

The first few days of legislative debate are limited to revenue enhancements. That term is generally a code word meaning new taxes, and I expect proposals to add to the tax burden of Massachusetts residents. Additional fees may be another proposal, though the budget proposal from our ways and means committee already includes hundreds of millions of dollars from that source.

I do not believe the house will impose additional taxes on voters who have repeatedly voted to limit taxation. Just last November voters renewed their anti-tax message by rejecting, by a narrow 55% to 45%, a proposal to eliminate the income tax. Another reason to reject taxes is the knowledge that new taxes would only delay the budget crunch for a year. Unless spending is curbed, the state will face the same shortfall next year.

After the house tax debate, we will spend days trying to change the priorities presented in the ways and means budget. I have sponsored a proposal to re-apportion local aid to help my district, and I will support other amendments to strengthen certain programs. The problem with any such proposals, however, is that members must show how funding for any changed can be provided without increasing the budget bottom line. That requirement, first proposed by my predecessor Iris Holland, is known as the Holland amendment.

As always, non-monetary issues will be part of the debate. I will defend the voter-approved bilingual education mandate from amendments that delay or destroy its intent. I will support several of Governor Romney's reform proposals that will provide needed reforms in the way state government operates. And I will reserve the right to vote against a final document that fails to provide the greatest benefit to the people of Massachusetts.

When May Day is over, after the house spends many hours over many long days, debating and compromising over each line item in the budget, we will send it to the senate, and the senate will begin the whole process all over again. So we should all stay tuned.