

Beacon Hill Byline by Rep. Mary Rogeness

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The Budget, Enacted on Time

It finally happened last week. The state budget for the 2004 fiscal year, beginning July 1, 2003, was enacted by the legislature before the new fiscal year started. That fact is symbolic of a good relationship between legislative leaders, and it serves the state well in a time of economic uncertainty. Here are some high points and low points -- and the reasons I voted against the spending plan.

The budget is notable for its timeliness and restraint, with a \$2.335 billion bottom line that is essentially level with the current year's spending.

Here are some of its strong points. It establishes many of Governor Romney's reorganization initiatives, consolidates Health and Human Service operations and streamlines environmental agencies. It retains Prescription Advantage, a popular insurance plan for senior citizens. It extends the investment tax credit, an important economic development tool, for five years. And it provides significant help to school districts for expensive special education tuitions.

Now for some weak points. The total relies on one-time revenues of \$400 million and artificially underfunds some line items. Snow and ice removal costs, for example, must be paid. They typically cost \$50 million, but the budget allocates \$15 million. In today's uncertain economic times, the budget will require further cuts by Governor Romney to meet the constitutional requirement that it be balanced.

The reduction in local aid to schools harms our town more than any other aspect of the state budget. Longmeadow and East Longmeadow are among 170 school districts that will receive 20% less than last year's state school aid. Re-allocating \$25 million from other state accounts could have moderated that cut and helped our struggling schools.

Retention of Boston Municipal Court costs the state millions of dollars. Governor Romney proposed the elimination of the patronage haven, a single court with administrative costs that match those of the entire district court system. Instead, the budget expands the court, thereby keeping scarce resources from our region's overburdened courtrooms.

Preservation of Medicaid funding of methadone programs uses scarce state dollars for the well-intentioned but questionable replacement of heroin addiction with methadone dependence.

Changes to the Massachusetts welfare program will make it more difficult for the state to meet federal guidelines. Our statute is less stringent than federal law, so it must tighten down its provisions when its federal waiver expires in a year. Instead of strengthening the work requirement to national standards, the budget allows parents to fulfill the entire 20-hour requirement with training or education. And it removes even that requirement if the state determines that it cannot provide adequate child care. These measures take a giant step backward from progress of the state's pioneering welfare reform law.

I have summarized some strengths and weaknesses of the budget. A negotiation always involves compromise, and I was hopeful that the final budget would take the best from both the house and the senate. Had it included the senate's funding of school aid, 5% higher than the house, and had it included the house provision to terminate Medicaid funding for methadone maintenance, it would have had my support. It did not, so I reluctantly cast my vote in opposition.