

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

August 7, 2003

Municipal Relief Law Enacted

Lieutenant Governor Healey signed the legislature's Municipal Relief bill into law last week. It was announced with much hoopla, but a close reading shows that many of its 141 sections are targeted to Boston and many others have the effect of aiding primarily that city. It contains a few benefits that Longmeadow may use and some aid for other communities, though many measures with significant cost-savings that span the state were either rejected or relegated to "study" for future consideration by the legislature. Here is a review of the new law as it helps our town.

A first look at the bill gives the impression that its main characteristic is that it increases the cost of citizens doing business with their town. Following the state's pattern of imposing new fees, municipal departments are allowed to raise additional money from that source. The state limits the fees and fines for town services or violations, and those maximum charges were raised for everything from fire department permits (from \$25 to \$50) to fines for blocking an intersection (from \$100 to \$150). A title search can now generate \$10 for the town, and parking fines can be increased by \$10.

Other provisions help town treasurers collect taxes. Towns may copy the state's successful tax amnesty program by offering a similar incentive for a one-year window. Estimated tax bills will be allowed to include known tax increases, avoiding the artificially low tax bills of last autumn and the winter "sticker shock" experienced this year by many Longmeadow homeowners.

School districts get some much needed relief. The law allows schools to file a single document to the Department of Education instead of the multiple reports of the past. It states that school districts may charge a bus fee for any student whose transportation is not required, and it allows school departments to retain half of the Medicaid reimbursements in some circumstances. And it removes the outdated requirement that all school employees be tested for tuberculosis.

Two personnel items may fall in to the category of robbing Peter to pay Paul. Towns are authorized to adopt early retirement incentives, but those programs impose pension costs that may outweigh the money saved in salaries. Pension charges, in another provision of the law, can be delayed for a few years, but any short term savings must be made up with larger payments in the future.

The municipal relief law was big news in Boston last week. I was on duty in the house of representatives when the bill, with a technical amendment submitted by the governor, was enacted, and I approved the emergency preamble that made it effective immediately. The law will help our town a little. And it holds out hope for follow-up legislation in the subjects it addresses with study committees. Next Byline will address those studies and the added benefit they can offer to every municipality in the state – if and only if they produce a bill that becomes a law.