

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Municipal Relief, Part 2: The high cost of government in Massachusetts

My education on the high cost of government in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts began with my years of service on the Longmeadow School Committee. The state requires towns to follow many rigid procedures to conduct town business. I have witnessed the difficulty in changing those mandates since Governor Romney began his initiative in January to reduce or eliminate the Boston imposed burdens on our towns.

The governor filed a municipal relief bill on January 30. Legislative leaders indicated as the season progressed that it would be taken up "soon." After all, cities and towns were feeling the same budgetary stress as the state. The bill incorporated cost-saving ideas gathered from municipal officials throughout Massachusetts.

A municipal relief bill was finally introduced in the house of representatives in June, but that bill bore little resemblance to the new law enacted a month later. In order to gain broad legislative support, some controversial initiatives were rejected out of hand. Others were removed from the bill and assigned to study commissions. Study commissions often signify the end of the road for legislative proposals, but I will be working to see that these proposals emerge in some fashion to provide meaningful cost savings to our town.

Here are the subjects for consideration.

Construction reform. Public bidding laws for construction projects are onerous, requiring towns to engage in time-consuming and inefficient procedures. They add cost in both time and money to such projects. General contractors and sub-contractors bid separately, and each aspect of the job has a winning bidder. The governor's proposal to remove the mandate that a general contractor use specified sub-contractors on a project was viewed as so controversial that it did not even make it into the legislative first draft.

Threshold for procurement. Towns must go through the entire public bidding process when the cost of a project reaches \$25,000, and the legislature proposed raising that trigger to at least \$100,000. That topic is being studied.

Gasoline tax exemption. Republican members proposed to exempt municipalities from paying the state's gasoline tax, saving them between \$15 and \$25 million annually. The federal government offers such an exemption. House leadership agreed to "study" the issue, but the conference committee deleted even the study.

Criminal Offender Record Information (CORI) relief. Background checks are required for many municipal workers. Anyone working with children in a camp or school setting must have a CORI check. The results are notoriously slow, and each check costs a town \$30. A proposed amendment would have allowed police departments to provide the service almost instantaneously and at no cost. The house rejected the amendment without authorizing a study.

The cities and towns of Massachusetts have their budgets in place for the next fiscal year. They know their state aid is reduced. And they know that the state's economy makes prospects bleak for additional state aid in the 2005 fiscal year. As your town services are reduced, remember the cost of Boston's mandates and please help me turn some of the above proposals into law.