

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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The State of Our State House

The Massachusetts House of Representatives is now officially organized and ready to take on the legislative agenda. We have been meeting since the beginning of the year, debating rules and passing emergency bills. But the building blocks that produce most new laws were put into place only last week, when Speaker DiMasi announced his new leadership team.

The work of the new legislative session is now officially underway. Since the business of the state was progressing before the committee structure was formed, let's begin with a status update.

Governor Romney launched the session with his State of the State address in mid-January, putting forth ideas to reform health care and auto insurance, improve education, and reduce state income taxes to the voter-mandated level of 5%. He followed that speech two weeks later with the release of his budget for the next fiscal year.

The governor's budget holds the line on spending, assumes a healthy revenue growth and increases local aid. It was released as a comprehensive blueprint for Massachusetts, though it will be re-worked, re-structured and re-created by both the house and senate in the next months.

The ball moves next to the legislature which, now that we have committees in place, is ready to come to bat.

Here is a review of the new committee leadership. Western Massachusetts benefits from several important leadership posts. Representative Tom Petrolati of Ludlow becomes the newly created speaker pro tempore, widely considered to be the closest advisor to the speaker. Representative Joe Wagner retains leadership of the transportation committee, and Representative Gale Candaras continues as a floor leader. Representative Cheryl Rivera is now chair of the newly created Public safety and homeland security committee. These area leaders will be strong voices for our region's needs at the state level.

Many other newly appointed leaders, however, are well-known advocates of increased government spending. They were excluded from leadership under the former speaker. Their new prominence, combined with Speaker DiMasi's pledge that committees will be more active in producing bills, appear to indicate a strong move to the left.

No such move can be completed without the ways and means committee, now chaired by Robert DeLeo. He is a Boston area representative who has the awesome responsibility of producing a budget in his first two months on the job. His previous role was chairman of an important procedural committee, where he was responsible for seeing that each bill was appropriately drafted. Now he will oversee the appropriate crafting of the state's \$23 billion spending.

Governor Romney's ideas will be considered and adapted or rejected in the months ahead. That is standard operating procedure for the legislature. In a change from prior years, newly empowered leaders who have long advocated for additional government programs will test the authority of a new ways and means committee. The direction of the state will depend on the outcome of those challenges.