

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

May 2, 2005

## **Budget, 2006, Part 2**

Last week's State House budget debate ran longer than any in recent years, but the highlight came at its very end. We approved \$30 million of additional public school funding throughout the state, with \$162,200 earmarked for Longmeadow. That made the week worthwhile.

The debate ran from 10:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m., Monday to Thursday and 11:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. on Friday. That's 54 hours of session, hours that came to a close late Friday with unanimous approval of a spending plan for the coming year with a total cost of \$23.7 billion. Here are some highlights of that debate.

The budget came to us with a 4 1.2% increase in local aid, the increase recommended by Gov. Romney. It did not, however have the governor's rollback of the income tax rate to 5%. The week's debate opened with an attempt by Republicans to reduce the tax rate, an attempt that was quickly defeated. Then we moved to other points of contention.

The issue of school funding hung over the debate for most of the week because of continuing shortfalls to many school districts. Our original budget proposed level funding for most schools, a proposal that most legislators strongly resisted. For Longmeadow, it meant the fourth year in a row with funding at the same dollar amount, 15% less than we received in 2002. It was a great achievement finally to make a change to that funding.

The additional \$162,200 that Longmeadow is slated to receive may appear as a drop in the bucket for our schools, but it offers the first indication that the state is willing to return to its earlier position as an important partner in public education funding. As a secondary bonus, the state METCO program received \$2 million in new funds, an increase that will provide additional money to Longmeadow for that critical program.

Local aid from the lottery is always a debate topic. Lottery proceeds are required to be distributed to cities and towns, but a ceiling was placed on that distribution during the recent economic downturn, with excess dollars going to other state expenses. This year some of that diversion was retracted, and a Republican amendment was adopted that will hasten the removal of the lottery cap in future years.

The budget broke new ground by focusing on actual fiscal items instead of following recent trends to include unrelated policy decisions in the budget. A breach from that decision came with a surprise proposal to grant higher education in-state residency status to undocumented alien students. House members quickly removed that proposal.

Other items receiving new funding include our local hospitals, the Holyoke Soldiers' Home and District Attorneys. Police departments and district attorneys share equally in the proceeds from drug forfeitures, and the house rejected a ways and means proposal to siphon off a portion of that money.

After all of the negotiations, debate and compromise, the budget passed with unanimous support for the first time in several years. And the state representatives made our way home to relax over the weekend and prepare for the next legislative issue.