

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

November 30, 2005

Winding Up and Gearing Down

“The public can rest easy,” a cynic might say. “The lawmakers have gone home.” That’s not really the case, of course. Taking issue with the sentiment, this week’s Byline will talk about the accomplishments of the year’s legislative session.

The Massachusetts legislature must, by rule, finish with formal, voting sessions on the third Wednesday of November in this, the first year of its session. Legislative rules, however, are suspended more often than not, and that rule has already been adjusted. If certain conference committees complete their negotiations before Christmas, the legislature can be called back into session to enact the bills. More on those bills later.

We passed new laws help people make ends meet. the August sales tax holiday allowed everyone to save 5% on their retail purchases by waiving sales tax for the weekend.

Though the Democrat majority refused to consider the voter-mandated reduction in the state income tax, they did approve a bill to provide incentives to motion picture companies that film productions in Massachusetts. As Canada and other states have enacted such tax credits, moviemakers have taken their productions out of state even when filming a “Massachusetts” scene. It is a good law that should help our economy, but a general tax cut would have helped more.

A last minute H.E.A.T. (Heating Energy Assistance Tax Relief) law contains multiple incentives and credits for energy-saving investments in addition to funding home heating assistance programs for low-income residents. It also provides a tax deduction home heating costs for some.

The senior circuit breaker retains a tax credit for homeowners whose real estate taxes, water and sewer charges exceed 10% of their income.

We passed a “Welcome Home” bill for returning military personnel that could be termed the Massachusetts GI bill. Signed by Gov. Romney on Veterans Day, it adds life insurance coverage and waives fees and tuition at state schools for the state’s newest veterans.

Melanie’s bill, now Melanie’s Law, is our attempt both to punish repeat drunk drivers and to keep them off the road. Named for a young girl who was killed by a repeat offender, it went to Gov. Romney lacking strong sanctions. The governor then returned the bill to the legislature after inserting some of those provisions. Largely owing to public pressure brought through the advocacy of young Melanie’s family, the legislature then passed a strengthened law.

Many of our endeavors have not yet made it into law.

Health care reform measures have been passed, but the bill sits in a conference committee. Gov. Romney negotiated with the federal government to provide near-universal health insurance in the state. Hundreds of millions of federal dollars will help fund the program, but enabling legislation must be in statute by mid-January. If house and senate conferees come to agreement on a bill, the legislature is likely to reconvene in December.

Supplemental budget and economic stimulus bills likewise sit in conference committees, with the possibility of enactment at a special session.

Bills dealing with interstate wine shipment and retroactive capital gains tax were returned to the legislature after Gov. Romney either vetoed or amended them. Next byline I’ll explain what’s up with those important issues. In the meantime, here’s a hint to wine connoisseurs: call an out-of-state vineyard to have your favorite wine shipped to you before the lawmakers return to Boston!