

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Happy New Year!

Because Christmas and New Year's Day fall on Sundays this year, the days between the holidays provide a week to reflect on the possibilities that lie ahead in the New Year. Even the State House is quiet, except for a lingering struggle over simulcasting among the state's racetracks. So I have taken some time to identify my hopes for new laws that will help the people and communities I represent. Here are my hopes for 2006.

Increased state aid for our town is at the top of my list. School aid has been limited since the economic downturn of 2002, and we have not recovered from those changes. Lottery distributions were cut as well, and I will work to get that money restored to its stated purpose of local aid.

My next proposal for 2006 is reduction in the state income tax. Voters have engaged in a lingering battle with the legislature since the historic 5% tax rate was "temporarily" raised in the 1980s. Our towns voted in 2000 along with the rest of the state to restore the old tax rate, but that vote that was overturned by the legislature in 2002. State revenue grew by 7% last year, and it is on target for similar growth this year. It is time to reduce income taxes.

Next comes auto insurance reform, a proposal that would reduce premiums. It has hit a few roadblocks along the way. Massachusetts is the only state to dictate the cost of insuring your car, and a house bill proposes transitioning to a more free-market system. Currently, there's no such thing as checking around between companies, since each one uses the same, state-established rate system. Now that the state has reduced rates for 2006 under the existing system, consumers are not clamoring for the reductions that would come from a complete overhaul.

The final topic may have the highest impact on all of us in the years ahead. It is a comprehensive new health insurance bill that can serve as a national model for increasing coverage of the population. The bill has been pending since Governor Romney negotiated a comprehensive law as part of a Medicaid waiver from the federal government. He gained the promise of \$385 million in additional federal Medicaid funds *if* certain standards are met.

The bill must be ready for final passage next month in order to meet federal deadlines for implementation. The health insurance issue had three stages: governor, house and senate.

The governor's bill expands coverage; the house bill retains the new coverage but imposes a new tax. The senate bill has no tax, though it provides limited new coverage. The bill now sits in a conference committee is charged with delivering a single bill that meets federal waiver provisions by the January deadline for federal review of the new law. It must be a bill that Governor Romney will sign, which means that it cannot contain a tax. I am pulling for passage of such a bill, a first-in-the nation plan to provide near-universal health care for state residents.

These are my hopes for the year that lies ahead. Next week, it's back to Boston to try to make them realities.

Happy New Year to all.