

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Setting the Pace

If the legislature had worked this hard last year, we would have nothing left to do! Already in January the house has strengthened laws to combat gang violence, rejected in-state tuition rates for illegal aliens, approved mandatory seat belts, and responded to the governor's proposal to increase local aid. And the month is not over.

Here are some details concerning the issues above.

Taking the last item first, Governor Romney presented his "State of the State" speech last week, which included a proposal to spend nearly \$200 million in new aid to the cities and towns of Massachusetts. Our municipalities suffered over the past few years with reduced state aid, and the new proposal, which will provide \$382,582 to Longmeadow, comes at a critical time for the town. Next year's budgets are being assembled in the coming weeks, and the prospect of additional revenue should make the task easier. The governor's budget was released after deadline this week, and that should also provide additional school-targeted money.

Back to the beginning of the list, we started the year fighting gang violence. An epidemic of violence in our cities prompted legislative action on a bill that attempts to protect witnesses from retribution. Filed last year by Lt. Gov. Kerry Healey, it gained momentum because of the alarming homicide statistics in Boston and Springfield and the refusal of witnesses to come forward because of threats to their safety. Augmented with new penalties and new enforcement tools, it passed the house with only two dissenting votes.

Next came the question of in-state tuition for illegal aliens, an issue that has been discussed in State House halls and throughout the state for more than a year. A federal court decision entitles undocumented aliens to attend public schools, but they are not entitled to attend college. Anyone who has applied to a state school knows that the forms require proof of residency in Massachusetts in order to qualify for in-state tuition rates.

This month's bill authorized in-state tuition for high school graduates who cannot provide that proof because they are not in the state or the country legally. I expected the bill to pass because of Speaker DiMasi's support. But as the debate progressed, the tide seemed to shift. One amendment failed by two votes; another by four. When the final vote was tallied, the proposal lost by a 57 to 97 margin. I opposed the bill, believing that illegal immigration needs to be addressed by the federal government. Illegal status prevents people from being licensed to drive or eligible to work. How can we ignore it to give them a state-assisted college education?

The last debate of last week yielded another surprise vote. Primary enforcement of seat belt use, meaning that officers can stop a motorist solely because he is unbelted, is a recurring issue in Massachusetts. Passed repeatedly by the state senate, it has failed twice in the house on tie votes, though I have supported it both times. This year, after an emotional debate that pitted personal freedom against public safety, the bill finally passed with the narrowest of margins, 76 to 74. It will go to the senate, where its fate is unknown. Rumors are that, just as the house has changed its mind on seat belts, so has the senate. That body may now reject the mandate.

While setting a good pace for the year, we have not finalized the seat belt issue. So, even though you don't have to, I hope you buckle up when you get behind the wheel.