

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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### **Health Care Reform – What’s the rush?**

Last fall the house of representatives passed a new health care bill. A couple weeks later the senate passed a health care bill. You might think that would lead to Massachusetts having a new health care law by March 1<sup>st</sup>, but you’d be mistaken. Here’s the unfinished health care story.

Massachusetts will be rewarded with \$385 million from the federal government if the bill is passed – immediately. This time last year the governor negotiated a unique health care program with the federal government. Massachusetts would collect \$385 million if we passed a law to provide health insurance coverage to most of our citizens through a series of new procedures. The law would have to be passed early enough to give federal agencies time to assess its provisions before the effective date of July 1. Mid-January was the suggested date, a date that is long gone.

The house and senate bills, while different, purport to fill the requirements for new funding. It is those differences that have seemed insurmountable as the calendar moved well beyond the target date. The legislative conference committee appeared deadlocked as house Democrats insisted on an employer tax, which the senate rejected.

And \$385 million hang in the balance.

Last week the division came to a head. In an emergency effort to save the federal funding, Senate President Travaglini proposed yet another new bill. The senate quickly and unanimously passed it, and Speaker DiMasi then called a Democratic caucus to discuss the situation. I was not at the caucus (Republicans were not invited) but members have reported to me personally that the room had an “us versus them” aura, and everyone in attendance urged the speaker to stick to his guns. The caucus took place Thursday afternoon.

Then came Friday. What a difference a day makes. The two legislative leaders met Thursday evening for a previously scheduled dinner with their wives, and they credit the women’s touch for ending the legislative logjam. The house would not even have to deal with the interim bill offered of the senate. By Friday afternoon, house members were notified to be on alert all this week for a session to vote on the long hoped-for conference committee report.

The compromise bill is not available for my deadline, but general provisions have been announced. The bill will enable – and require – most state residents to acquire health care insurance in the next three years. Subsidies and low-cost policies will help low income residents purchase coverage, limiting the need for hospitals to provide free care. Employers who do not offer insurance may be assessed a fee, though not the massive 7% of payroll proposed in the original house bill.

Passage of the new law will brand Massachusetts as the undisputed national leader for providing high quality health care to all of our residents. The devil is in the details, of course, and many details have not yet been worked out. So I won’t relax until Gov. Romney signs the bill. On that day, we will deserve a real celebration.