

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Budgeting for 2007

The Massachusetts state budget trickles out over several months, starting with the governor's budget, released in January. Phase two came last week with the house budget, which will be debated next week. Senate budget and conference committee are still to come, but this is a good time to take stock of the state's finances.

Here is where we stand at this point. Both the governor and the house ways and means committee have published similar bottom lines to their spending plans, \$25.3 billion dollars. But that's just the beginning. By last Wednesday, the deadline for filing amendments to the budget, 1,600 amendments were submitted, each one tweaking some particular line item. Think of me next week as we house members work our way through all of those proposals.

Governor Romney has the privilege of sending out his budget as the last word from his office. The house ways and means chair does not have that privilege. Chairman Robert DeLeo has 158 other members, and each one of us has a few ideas of how things could be done better. House members were pleased to see that our budget followed the governor's lead in adding \$158 million for local aid to cities and towns. But it's the differences that will drive next week's debate.

Tip O'Neill made the statement, "All politics is local," and that slogan drives us as we head into the week ahead. School aid is the local item that caught everyone's eye.

Chapter 70 provides state assistance to local school districts. Governor Romney funded aid to school districts at a much higher level than the house. Both budgets show increased overall funding, but every school district suffers from the house allocation. Additionally, the adoption of new distribution formulas meant that towns like ours see little if any increase. Longmeadow receives exactly the same state assistance we had last year. The town has struggled to fund our schools, and we simply can't get along without more state help. Several years ago, when state revenues collapsed, the state reduced our funds by 20%. Now that the state economy is growing, we believe that it is time to restore those funds. I have co-sponsored amendments to restore funding to the 2002 level.

School aid is the biggest issue to face us. At the most, 50 amendments have been filed to change that line item. But that leaves 1550 amendments to be addressed. Other amendments are important to one or more house member. Granting that our debate is scheduled to finish within one week, you might think it impossible to dispose of such a number of amendments.

It has been done before, and it will be done again. First, many are duplicate amendments, and those will be removed. Second, the amendments will be grouped by subject area and supporters will meet to make their case for specific changes. Approved changes will be presented in a single consolidated package. And finally, as the week of 12 hours sessions draws to a close, simple exhaustion may lead to resolution of remaining issues.

If you want to know what's going on, you can check the budget online at <http://www.mass.gov/legis/07budget/house>. The budget, a list of amendments and updates on the week's actions can all be accessed through that web address. C-Span 2 shows some of our house sessions, so you can check cable Channel 45 to see if the debate is on.

If you want my input on a specific part of the budget, let me know by email me to mary@rogeness.com. Otherwise, I'll just say this -- Wish me luck.