

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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The House Budget Debate

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” That is the famous opening sentence from Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*. It can describe many happenings in our lives. It could refer to the state budget proposed last month by Governor Patrick. And it could portray the House of Representatives budget that is this week’s debate topic in Boston.

The two budgets spend the same amount of money, though the House is still open to changes. Members are free to submit amendments to improve on the ideas of our ways and means committee. It is a privilege of membership that we take very seriously, as demonstrated by the 1,470 amendments that were filed in the clerk’s office last week.

We will work our way through those amendments during the whole week. And we are likely to dispose of all amendments with minimal debate. The procedure adopted a few years ago dictates that amendments dealing with a single topic or government agency be aggregated. Interested members then hash out their various proposals outside of the house chamber; a consolidated amendment is presented to the House; and most advocates emerge with some satisfaction.

The Longmeadow News deadline comes before the debate finishes, so I can’t tell you which programs gain favor during sessions. Instead I will focus on some differences between House 1, Gov. Patrick’s budget, and House 4000, the document released by the House ways and means committee.

School funding is an important difference. Gov. Patrick’s allocations of state money made it the best of times for East Longmeadow, but the worst of times for Longmeadow. The House budget pulled back funding from the former and increased the money to our town, reinstating a formula adopted in last year’s budget to improve equitable distribution of state assistance.

Public safety is another topic that has differing treatment. If you live in a high crime area, you applauded the governor’s proposal to train and pay salaries for 250 new police officers. However, it did not offer future funding of those new officers. Additionally, it funded that program by taking community policing grants from every police department. The community police dollars fund important services throughout the state. The House restores funding for Longmeadow and other local departments.

Gov. Patrick relied on substantial new taxes on business to balance his budget, which the House rejected. We also turned down his local option taxes, though they may be debated later by the legislature.

Earmarks! Budget earmarks have come under nationwide scrutiny lately because of their questionable use for pork barrel spending in Washington. However, they provide a way for lawmakers to direct state dollars to the appropriate programs. For example, it was an earmark that paid for repairs to the Community House. Governors do not like earmarks, whether they are Republicans or Democrats. As published, the House budget contained minimal such items. But half or more of the amendments simply dictate how the money already in the budget should be spent. And the final budget is likely to include many of those earmarks.

This week will finish step two of the budget marathon. I hope it will include the earmark or special program that is important to you. The next step is the senate budget, due to be released next month. That leaves plenty of time for a conference committee, and we should then be on track for a smooth transition to the new fiscal year on July 1.