

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Showing off our state

Our legislature finished up much business late last month and called a halt to “formal” voting sessions until September. That summer recess usually sends a signal for lawmakers to spend time with local voters and take a little family vacation time. But this year August has a different meaning.

The National Congress of State Legislators convened last week in Boston. The city, the legislators and the hundreds of supporting volunteers made it our task to show Boston as a friendly town and Massachusetts as a welcoming state. And we earned an A+ for the effort.

Boston drew the highest attendance in the organization’s history, with 9,000 attendees, and we had a crowd with high expectations. The new convention center handled both general meetings and workshops without stress. Chartered buses carried visitors through the narrow downtown streets efficiently. And the special events were a bonus that could only come from Boston.

Actually, the special events might have been partly responsible for the record attendance. No other city has an attraction to match Fenway Park, and our host committee was able to schedule an opening reception at Fenway on Monday night. The Sox were out of town, so we had access to most of the park, from dugout to the Green Monster.

The convention closed with another unique Boston institution, the Boston Pops. People from all over the country have watched the Pops perform on television, and they put on an excellent show for the crowd.

The workshops were excellent, but that is to be expected at such a meeting. Legislators from many states took part in forums, and service providers gave information about their specialties. I attended a session about voting systems because of my work on the Elections Committee and another that addressed the coming challenges of paying for retiree benefits. At the sessions and in informal conversations, it was worthwhile to find out how other states are handling issues that are common to all of us.

The general sessions gave us another chance to showcase Massachusetts’ personalities. Of course we had access to out-of-town celebrities. Nancy Pelosi came from Washington to speak, as did Michael Chertoff. But Andy Card only had to return to the legislature where he served as a State Representative, and David Gergen simply had to come across the river from Cambridge. Those two men shared the stage to discuss their views of the presidency.

Historian David McCullough held the complete attention of a standing-room crowd, talking of the fascination of history and the importance of passing its stories to our children and grandchildren.

The convention wrapped up on Thursday, and the transient reality of such events showed itself. The trade show booths were already removed, heading to storage or the next event. Attendees were shifting gears from work, looking forward to a weekend of leisure.

Representatives of local tourism boards had done their best to promote their parts of Massachusetts, and I hope Mary Kay Wydra of the Springfield Convention and Visitors Bureau convinced some them to take in the Pioneer Valley before heading home.

I am glad to have been a bit player in such a successful showcase for our state.