

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

August 30, 2007

The State House in August

Here we are in the dog days of August. It's the month when Congress recesses. Even the governor goes on vacation. What does our Massachusetts legislature do?

We are still in session, though it is a sort of "session-lite." Both the house and the senate meet twice a week in what are called informal sessions. Very few members attend, and we are free to enact new laws -- with these caveats. Bills should be non-controversial. Recorded votes cannot be taken, and a single member can stop progress by objecting to a bill.

This has been the legislative pattern for many years now. We have the authority to adjourn the session entirely, turning much authority over to the governor. Long-serving lawmakers have informed me that, whichever party controls the governor's office, our leaders are reluctant to cede power to the other branch of government.

What happens at these informal sessions?

I am probably more aware than most members of the business that goes on at informal sessions because of my role as Assistant Leader in the Republican caucus. I share the responsibility of monitoring the agenda and watching for items that should be brought before the full house when we reconvene in September.

One such item came up a few weeks ago, a bill to allow public employees to authorize a union without going through a secret ballot election. A majority of members would need only to sign a card stating their desire to unionize. Passed through both houses on a mostly party line vote, the bill needs final enactment, and it was presented at the informal session for that vote.

The bill will have no trouble passing next month, but I objected when it was brought up. After coming up a few more times, with repeated Republican objections, the bill now seems to have moved off the agenda. But we will object again if it is presented. Allowing its passage would mean that "non-controversial" includes any bill that has majority support. If that were the case, we would not need many voting sessions in Boston.

Most bills are routine and have no opposition at all. Many deal with local government issues. Massachusetts might be called the original "nanny" state because of the control it holds over municipal government. In what must be a relic of post-prohibition, the state controls the number of liquor licenses according to a town's population. If a town wants to grant a new liquor license and its quota is filled, it must come to Boston requesting a law to allow the new restaurant or shop to open.

Many municipal governments are organized so that they need a new state law to make simple changes to the way they operate. For example, a city came to us seeking to change its clerk from an elected to an appointed position. And Boston needed state permission to raise the salary paid to members of its Licensing Board.

Now September is just around the corner and with it a return to a full schedule of committee hearings and formal sessions of the legislature. It was fun while it lasted, but another year of session-lite is over.