

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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State House Business – Done and Undone

Our legislature is now halfway through its two year schedule of formal (voting) sessions. This year's session runs to mid-November, and next year the rules require us to wrap up at the end of July.

What have we accomplished in the past nine months – and what have we left undone?

I could work to make it sound productive, but the cold, hard reality is that we have not accomplished very much. We passed the annual budget and had pro forma overrides of minimal gubernatorial vetoes. A joint session kept the marriage petition off next year's ballot. And, just last week the house voted to abolish the state's strict anti-ticket-scalping law. Any change in the scalping prohibition will come too late for the Red Sox post-season ticket sales, but we are on the job!

Even though people may often served better when fewer laws are passed, the legislature needs to act on some languishing items. The speaker's energy bill was filed early in the year, but it still sits in committee. And the governor's economic development bonding proposal is still in development.

Closing the books on last year's budget is an example of an action that must be taken. The state's last fiscal year ended in June, closing with some budget shortfalls that are typically addressed with a final deficiency budget in July or August. That bill is still pending this year, leaving the state's bills unpaid 90 days after the end of the fiscal year.

One controversial aspect of last year's budget is its surplus. After months of worry about state revenue shortfalls and year-end budget deficits, the numbers came in. Massachusetts has a surplus in excess of \$400 million.

A budget surplus draws the interest of legislators and advocates alike, as people scramble to secure a piece of that pie for pet projects. Of course we must fund last year's obligations, but I support sending the remaining surplus to cities and towns as local aid.

During the recent economic downturn, the state retained millions of dollars from lottery receipts that were to go to cities and towns. Now that state revenue is again growing, it seems appropriate to compensate localities for the years they did without their expected state aid. And it happens that the state surplus is close to the \$450 million shortfall that communities experienced.

A telling of unfinished business should include the casino question, but that prominent issue is beyond our control. The governor's announcement that he wants casino gambling in Massachusetts led to a frenzy among both supporters and opponents. His proposal has no meaning until he crafts a bill and sends it to the legislature. Still, the fact that the proposal is pending has drawn attention away from other matters to the questions of where, who, when and how it would change Massachusetts. Those questions may not have ready answers since Speaker DiMasi recently stated that the casino proposal might not come up for a vote in the house in all of next year.

In the meantime, I am ready to get down to work.