

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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What is a “Green” automobile?

Last year Speaker Sal DiMasi embarked on a mission to make Massachusetts a more environmentally sound state. We would reduce emissions, promote use of renewable energy sources and consider the environmental impact of the actions of government. His bill to achieve these goals was debated in the house and advanced to the senate as this year’s legislative session came to a close last week.

The comprehensive bill is more than 50 pages long, and such bills always draw additional ideas from members. In this case we offered 79 amendments. While accepting a few ideas, house leaders managed the bill by grouping most amendments in batches and consolidating their ideas in a few lines that rejected most if not all of their substance. Most members had little opportunity to actually debate their ideas.

I offered an amendment that disappeared during a consolidation, so I’m using the Byline to make the points I would have made on the house floor. The amendment offered favorable tax treatment for the purchase of a high-mileage vehicle *whatever its source of energy*.

The Speaker’s bill offers a \$2,000 tax deduction to anyone who purchases a new hybrid automobile. And that is a fine idea. The deduction comes from the successful record of Honda’s Prius hybrid in reducing its use of gasoline.

My amendment says that if you put a fuel-efficient vehicle on the road, especially if that action takes an older car out of service, this too cleans up our atmosphere.

If our goal is to reduce the amount of carbon dioxide emitted into the atmosphere, it seems appropriate to me that our incentive should target the purchase of any fuel-efficient vehicle, so my amendment extended the deduction to “Any purchaser of a hybrid or alternative fuel vehicle or high-efficiency vehicle”.

I learned a lot in researching the amendment. In defining a “high efficiency vehicle,” I adopted New York’s statutory ruling that a car that uses no motor fuel or diesel oil has high efficiency.

Then I dealt with the mileage requirement for standard motor vehicles. The US Department of Energy provides a comprehensive listing of all vehicles, their EPA miles per gallon ratings and their cost of operation. A significant number of those automobiles show highway mileage above 30 mpg. Some exceed 35 mpg. My goal was to recognize that non-hybrids can be fuel efficient without adding significant cost to the program, so I selected the higher number as the non-hybrid gasoline requirement for the state incentive.

After setting the standard, I checked mileage for hybrids. The Prius is the champion, with its 48/45 numbers for city and highway mileage. A new Lexus, however, has mileage of 20/22. The LS 600h is a magnificent luxury car, but it is hard to justify a tax benefit to its purchaser on the basis of its benefit to the environment.

If an environmentally conscious individual purchases a Corolla (28/37), a Rio (25/35) or a Civic (25/36), that person should be entitled to the same benefit as the hybrid buyer.

For now, the house has authorized the hybrid-only deduction and the senate has yet to take up the issue. So if you are car shopping in the near future, your new car will give you savings only at the gas pump.