

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

August 13, 2008

Legislative Wrap-Up

The legislature closed out our 2008 formal session on the last day of July. Working late into the night throughout the week, it seemed like we accomplished as much in those last days as we did in the first six months.

In just a few short days we passed billions of dollars worth of state bonds, enacted comprehensive new laws, restored most budget items vetoed by the governor, passed another budget. And then we went home because our rules dictate that our voting sessions end on July 31 in an election year.

You might think that our two-year session gave us plenty of time to deal with important issues, but that would be a misunderstanding of the way things work. Running out the clock makes an important contribution to procedure.

If legislators cannot agree on a specific bill, the deadline can force compromise. If leaders want to appear to support of a measure, they can advance it *almost* to the governor's desk and lament that they simply ran out of time. If they wish to allow a bill to be vetoed, they can send it to the governor in those last days. He can then issue the veto after legislators have adjourned.

Here are some examples of those successful strategies.

Concerning compromise: Bond bills require roll call votes, so the deadline brought agreement on bills to fund bridges, higher education and other capital needs. The deadline also forced agreement on a comprehensive medical cost containment bill and an environmental "green" bill.

Concerning delaying tactics: Two election bills made it almost to the governor's desk: a bill to allow individuals to register to vote on Election Day and a bill to promote a national popular vote for president. Both the house and senate approved the bills, though I voted against them. They only needed enactment. But one is still in the house, the other in the senate. And since each bill has opposition, neither can be approved in the informal sessions that continue throughout the year.

Using the governor's veto power: A pension increase for state workers was sent to the governor, even though he had indicated his lack of support. Now it's vetoed, and there's nothing we can do about it. The same applies to budget and bond line items.

A surprise veto came on a bill dealing with Massachusetts's Savings Bank Life Insurance (SBLI). I applauded our passage of a bill allowing the company to establish different premiums for men and women, since it is the only company forced to price both policies the same. But I forgot the wise Yogi Berra saying, "It's not over till it's over." Governor Patrick returned the bill to the legislature last week with an amendment turning the bill on its head. His amendment would require all insurance companies to offer only gender-neutral products, effectively killing the bill.

I have written about some of the politics of a hectic week at the State House, but not about a serious underlying concern of mine. The legislature overrode the governor's veto attempts to limit expenditures. It approved substantial new levies on business to fund health insurance costs. It voted for billions of dollars of new state bonds.

We took all of those actions relying on a reluctant federal government to subsidize our health care expenses to the tune of an additional \$600 million. At the same time, the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation warns that we face a billion dollar shortfall in the budget year ahead.

The time ahead reminds me of Massachusetts in the 1980s, not the commonwealth that has charted a careful course throughout my time in the legislature. I hope the next legislature will take on the challenge of correcting our hazardous course.

