

In the Arena
By Tom Conroy
January 2008

State House Priorities for 2008

Happy New Year. It is my sincere hope that everyone enjoyed the holidays, and stayed safe. Our family took time over the past couple of weeks to reflect on the many blessings we have received, while trying to keep perspective on the day-to-day challenges we face.

Reflecting on the Massachusetts state government's performance during 2007, we saw occasional sparring but also significant unity of purpose amongst three leaders: Governor Deval Patrick, House Speaker Sal DiMasi, and Senate President Therese Murray. Accomplishments included:

- * agreement on a balanced budget;
- * a significant (6.3%) increase in state aid to towns and cities;
- * two new laws focused on lowering pension and health care costs for towns, by utilizing the state's size, management expertise, and leverage;
- * agreement on preserving marriage equality;
- * encouraging growth of the film industry in Massachusetts;
- * a new law to protect consumers and businesses against identity theft;
- * a new law to prevent recurrence of the mortgage lending abuses that in part led to the subprime lending and credit crisis;
- * passage in the House, with the Governor's support, of a bill promoting energy efficiency and investing in the renewable energy industry in the state;
- * continued implementation of the health care reform legislation of 2006;
- * conclusion of a broad, bipartisan study on corporate taxation.

We also saw a first year Governor offering numerous infrastructure initiatives. These included a \$1.2 billion commuter rail link to New Bedford, a \$1 billion life sciences industry proposal, a \$1.5 billion higher education capital expenditure plan, a \$1.4 billion bond bill for land conservation, bridges, and recreational facilities, and most recently, a \$2.5 billion catchall that includes funding for libraries, correctional facilities, and information technology. To his credit, Governor Patrick offered ways to fund a portion of these ideas, by raising the lid on state borrowing, closing corporate tax loopholes, and by selling casino licenses.

The legislative agenda for 2008 at the State House will include serious evaluation of these initiatives, along with other significant challenges. They include:

- * Completing a balanced budget for State FY 2009, which commences July 1, 2008, and maintaining a strong commitment to increasing state aid for towns and municipalities;
- * Senate passage of the energy efficiency and renewable energy bill that the House passed in November 2007, and then conference committee agreement and passage of a compromise bill;

- * Addressing the Governor's casino proposal;
- * Taking legislative action on the corporate taxation report recommendations;
- * Addressing the transportation finance issue, which entails over \$15 billion in maintenance needs to care for our roads and bridges in the state over the next decade;
- * Beginning to fund the retired state employee health care benefits liability, which could exceed \$13 billion if we don't start setting aside funds in a trust;
- * Continuing to implement and fund the health care reform law of 2006;
- * Dealing with the numerous ballot initiatives that will be voted on in November 2008, which include a move to eliminate the state income tax.

I am fortunate to have a seat on key committees that will be evaluating these initiatives and challenges. For example, the casino proposal and life sciences bills have been referred to the Joint Committee on Economic Development and Emerging Technologies, and I've already participated actively in committee hearings on both topics. The Joint Committee on Revenue, of which I am a member, will hold hearings this winter on the corporate taxation report. The Joint Committee on Public Service - which was largely responsible for passage of the two laws in 2007 empowering towns to use the state's leverage on health care and pensions - will consider the state employee health care benefits liability challenge, and I'm on that committee too.

My approach to these challenges will be based on my approach to solving problems in general: gather the facts, conduct rigorous analysis, determine the root causes of the need or problem, work collaboratively to develop ideas to address the challenges, develop viable legislative solutions with colleagues and outside experts, and help gain their passage into law. Throughout the process, I will constantly weigh whether legislative solutions are appropriate, or whether market forces, executive branch action, or other remedies would be most effective. Not every challenge is a nail, and not every solution should be a hammer.

During 2007, this approach proved successful. I used it to advocate effectively for increased state aid to Lincoln, Sudbury, and Wayland. I used it as we shaped the health care and pension bills that will save towns money. I found it helpful during evaluation of the identity theft and other bills we passed during the year. I am optimistic about further success of this approach during 2008.

Of course, I welcome your thoughts, comments, and ideas about all of these challenges facing our Commonwealth. I am continually impressed by the talent, expertise, and relevant experience that is resident in so many people of Lincoln, Sudbury, and Wayland. Many of you have contacted me during 2007 - I've received over 1,000 calls, letters, or emails - and I've enlisted your help in making me a better advocate for everyone in our communities. Thank you for your assistance during the past year, and I look forward to working with you during 2008.

Tom Conroy is the state representative for Lincoln, Sudbury, and Wayland and can be contacted at Rep.ThomasConroy@hou.state.ma.us.