

In the Arena
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By Tom Conroy

A Flurry of State House Action

The current legislative session at the State House is nearing its conclusion with a flurry of activity on several topics, including child welfare, corporate tax reform, energy conservation, and of course the budget. The current legislative session, which began in January 2007 and concludes at the end of this month, can be compared to writing a college thesis: most of the actual writing gets crammed in right before the deadline.

Amidst the flurry of activity, it's important to analyze whether the major initiatives now becoming law are indeed the top priorities for the people of the Commonwealth and the common good. Let's take a look.

Child welfare

Is this a top priority? Yes, because nearly 10,000 of our most vulnerable citizens -neglected or abused children- are wards of the state. There are over 30,000 victims of child abuse or neglect in Massachusetts each year, a staggering figure about which I became familiar in the 1990s when I was working closely with DSS. The new law, which I supported and which stems from the Haleigh Poutre incident in 2006, enhances oversight of every child in the state's custody and ensures all foster children are in appropriate living situations. Highlights of the new law:

- * In the event of three abuse and neglect reports about one family within one year, requires senior Department of Children and Families (formerly DSS) management review and notification of local police and the district attorney;
- * Requires all mandatory reporters to be trained in recognizing child abuse and increases the penalty for failing to report serious child abuse; and
- * Sets minimum education standards for social workers, requiring a bachelor's degree for all case workers and a master's degree for all supervisors.

Helping this neediest group of children through additional care and protection and can prevent tragic situations from getting worse.

Cigarette tax and Corporate tax reform

Is this a top priority? Yes, we need the increased revenue -expected to be nearly \$500 million-to support more state aid to our towns. That's why I actively pushed the initially-reluctant House leadership to adopt the corporate tax reform initiative, and then helped shape it along the way. Highlights of new laws:

* Increases the cigarette tax by \$1-per-pack, which could generate \$175 million in new tax revenues this fiscal year (July 1, 2008 - June 30, 2009).

* Prevents large multi-national corporations from eluding Massachusetts corporate tax laws through legal and accounting schemes. These reforms could generate over \$290 million in new revenues.

* Lowers the corporate excise tax -which affects small businesses- in three annual steps, beginning in January 1st, 2010, from 9.5 percent to 8 percent.

Taxes have two effects: they generate revenue for other causes, and they change behavior. The cigarette tax will reduce the prevalence of smoking, which will ultimately save taxpayers dollars by keeping state Medicaid and Medicare costs down. The lowering of the corporate excise tax rate will hopefully spur additional hiring at small businesses and keep more small business owners in Massachusetts.

Energy conservation

Is this a priority? Yes, because as a nation we are overly dependent on increasingly expensive fossil fuels and as a state we have for several years faced rising energy costs relative to other states because we lack production capacity. Highlights of the new law:

- Directs utility companies to invest in energy efficiency improvements instead of solely pursuing more power generation;
- Creates a reliable, long-term marketplace for renewable energy producers by encouraging current utility distributors to sign long-term contracts with renewable energy developers;
- Provides rebates to consumers for energy efficiency enhancements, and those who own wind and solar facilities would enjoy "net-metering" discounts by selling excess electricity; and
- Provides municipalities access to incentives and technical assistance for efficiency and renewable energy efforts.

Energy conservation, in our current economic and energy climate, is a no brainer.

Budget

Is this a priority? Yes. At over \$28 billion, state government spending is both a logical re-distribution of resources towards the neediest and most vulnerable in our society and a positive stimulus to our state's approximately \$350 billion economy. Highlights of this year's budget for our towns include:

* State aid amounting to \$14.8 million for Lincoln, Sudbury, and Wayland, a 6% increase over last year's levels, and a positive result for my top priority as your state representative; and

* \$50,000 and \$25,000 for invasive weed clean up in Wayland and Lincoln respectively, which I was able to include in the budget that the legislature sent to the Governor earlier this month.

Now here's the catch: the Governor decided to veto the \$75,000 for Wayland and Lincoln. My question to you: should the legislature override his veto?

Let me know your thoughts, and what other priorities you have for the state legislature.

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