
The Rosenberg Report

Vol. I
February 4, 2002

Hello!

Welcome to the first edition of my monthly on-line newsletter.

In each edition I will focus on one or two issues that are active on Beacon Hill and highlight a couple other noteworthy items that you might not have heard about. I'll also include a Roundup section where I'll let you know about grant announcements, road project updates, upcoming events, etc. And I'll throw in a trivia question just for fun.

We have a number of challenges facing us in the coming year and I hope this newsletter will help keep you informed about what's happening in state government. I also hope you will use the links you'll find below to explore the information that's available on-line.

This is our first attempt at something like this, so there are bound to be changes and modifications along the way. If you don't want to receive this newsletter, just send an e-mail to Tom in my district office and he'll take you off our list. His address is tumitch@sprynet.com. But if you like the newsletter, or want to make suggestions, you can e-mail Tom or send a message to me at Sen.StanRosenberg@Senate.state.ma.us.

Thanks for your attention. We look forward to hearing from you!

Yours,



February Focus

Clean Elections

As I'm sure you know, the SJC's recent action on Clean Elections has reinvigorated debate on Beacon Hill. I want you to know that I have consistently supported public financing and will continue to do so. I will not vote to repeal the law, nor will I vote to exempt the Legislature from its provisions.

Tax Amnesty

This week I am filing a bill calling for an amnesty period to encourage the payment of delinquent taxes as a way of helping the state weather the current economic slowdown. A similar program 20 years ago brought in \$86 million from delinquent taxpayers and I believe a well-designed, well-publicized program could produce a significant one-time source of revenue for the state today.

Let's face it. Tax revenue equals services, and if people don't pay what they legitimately owe then programs that benefit us all, like health care and education, will suffer.

Under my proposal, the state Commissioner of the Department of Revenue would be authorized to establish a two-month period prior to July 1, 2002, during which all penalties normally imposed for non-reporting, under-reporting, or non-payment of previously assessed taxes owed to the Commonwealth will be waived if any taxpayer voluntarily files delinquent returns and pays the taxes owed. The waivers will apply only to taxes paid during the two-month period.

This program would pay for itself. The remaining revenue would then be deposited in a new, two-year amnesty reserve fund. Half of the money, and any accrued interest, would be appropriated to the general fund during fiscal year 2003, and the other half during fiscal year 2004.

I realize that some people oppose tax amnesty plans because paying taxes is considered a civic duty and failure to do so should be punished. But I think the state's current fiscal situation demands innovative approaches to acquire the revenue the state is legitimately owed.

If the threat of punishment is keeping some tax delinquents from paying up, then I think it's better to forgive. I'll say it again – tax revenue equals services. The more tax delinquents we can encourage to come forward, the more services we'll be able to save.

I'm pleased to report that State Representative Cory Atkins (D-Concord) and Senator Marian Walsh (D-West Roxbury), the Senate chair of the Joint Committee on Taxation, have agreed to co-sponsor this bill.

I am hoping to get this bill on the fast track.

Rules Changes

Another issue likely to be debated in the next couple weeks is the question of rules changes.

About a month ago I proposed a number of legislative rules changes that I believe will improve the Legislature's performance by promoting openness, accessibility and consistency. I have targeted my efforts on four areas:

1) Special Elections

I have proposed that dates for special elections be set within 14 days after a

House or Senate member vacates the seat either because of death or resignation. The Senate has consistently set special election dates within this time frame and I think this should be a permanent rule. It's difficult for a district to lose a representative or a senator and citizens should know what to expect when that occurs. In such cases, consistency is a very good thing.

2) Technology Task Force

I have also suggested that the Senate create an *ad hoc* committee on technology to prepare a plan for improving the Senate's use of technology so that members and their constituents will have greater access to the legislative process.

You might recall that several years ago I chaired a similar committee for the Senate and prepared a plan that resulted in each Senator having e-mail and Internet access; the Senate having its own website with bill tracking and bill text features; and Senate sessions being broadcast live over the Internet. You'll find the links to those sites listed below.

It's been a few years since the Senate examined this issue closely and I think it's time to look at the next generation of technology to see what can be done to continue providing the most open and accessible Legislature possible. This newsletter, in fact, is a small piece of that effort.

3) Joint Committee System

This suggestion is a bit more obscure than the others, but I believe it would help the Senate enhance its ability to move legislation independent of the House of Representatives.

Currently, the number of members on House-Senate Joint Committees is determined by the number of members in the respective chambers. Consequently, there are more House members than Senate members on each Joint Committee. This imbalance can frustrate Senators because bills filed by us on behalf of our constituents often languish in committee without getting the attention they deserve.

To address this problem, I have made the following proposal: Any bill referred to a Joint Committee for study must be sent to the branch where the bill originated. For example, if my tax amnesty bill were sent to study, it would come back to the Senate where we could act on it independently of the Joint Committee.

This would happen for every bill that is sent to study, but now it can't happen for any.

4) Amendments to Existing Laws

Currently, when a bill is filed to amend an existing law, the only text that is printed for legislators and constituents is the text of the amendment itself. In order to see what the change would mean, you would have to get a copy of the Mass. General Laws and look up the original law.

I have proposed that amendments be printed side-by-side with the original text. This would help legislators and the general public better understand what the amendment means by placing it in the proper context.

There including a number to improve the budgeting process. That I will endorse.

Noteworthy

Addressing Medication Waste

In early January the Senate approved a bill that calls for the creation of a special task force to explore ways to reduce prescription medication waste.

Currently, state law requires that all unused prescriptions must be thrown away, a practice which some analysts say costs private and state-run facilities anywhere from \$15-\$30 million a year, not to mention what these medications might be doing to the environment and water supply. It is estimated that 20 percent of all medications are disposed of before their expiration dates.

The bill, filed by Senator Harriette Chandler (D-Worcester) and Representative James Leary (D-Worcester) calls for the Legislature to convene a task force made up of representatives from the Department of Public Health, Board of Pharmacy Registration and the Division of Medical Assistance, and to issue a report within 90 days after the fiscal '02 budget is signed into law. The report would focus on implementing safe and cost-effective ways to recycle unused medications.

The bill, S-2154, won broad support in the Senate and is currently in the House Ways and Means Committee.

Roundup

Conference for Municipal Officials

For you municipal officials out there, this year's conference will be Saturday, April 13th at The Clarion Hotel and Conference Center (formerly The Inn at Northampton).

We are in the process of putting the program together, but already several legislative leaders and administration officials have committed to come, including Senate President Tom Birmingham (D-Chelsea), who will give the lunchtime keynote address for the fourth consecutive year; Senator Richard Moore (D-Uxbridge), Senate Chair of the Joint Committee on Health Care; Senator Stephen Brewer (D-Barre), Senate Chair of the Joint Committee on Natural Resources; Representative Michael Cahill (D-Beverly), House Chair of the Joint Committee on Housing; and Stephen McGrail, Director of the Massachusetts Emergency Management Association; Secretary of Public Safety James Jajuga and Education Commissioner David Driscoll to name a few.

For more information, contact Tom in my district office at 413-587-6289, or by e-mail at tumitch@sprynet.com. Invitations will be going out in the next couple weeks.

Amherst Caucus

FYI for all Amherst Democrats – This information is from Linda Marston, Amherst Democratic Town Committee Chair: The Democratic Caucus will be held Saturday, February 9th at the Amherst Middle School in the cafeteria, 170 Chestnut Street.

Registration begins at 12:30 p.m., the caucus starts at 1:15 p.m., and registration closes at 1:30 p.m.

Hope to see you there.

State Grant Awards

Here's a list of the state grants that were awarded to the district in January:

- a) \$460,000 Public Works Economic Development grant to the town of Montague to develop a parking lot and make other improvements to the Colle Opera House.
- b) \$540,000 HOME grant from the state Department of Housing and Community Development to Rural Development, Inc. of Franklin County to conduct more single-family home development programs in various Franklin County towns.

Ongoing Projects

The following road projects went out for bid in January:

- a) Amherst – Route 9 and South Prospect Street intersection improvement project;
- b) Goshen – South Chesterfield Road reconstruction project;
- c) Chesterfield – Sugar Hill Road/Soaker Road reconstruction project;
- d) Williamsburg – Ashfield/Williamsburg Road (from Williamsburg to Conway) reconstruction project.

Trivia

OK, here's our trivia question: Can you name the towns that were lost in order to create the Quabbin Reservoir?

Submit your answers to tumitch@sprynet.com and watch this space for the correct answer.

Links

Here are a few links. Until next time, happy surfing!

Massachusetts State Government Home Page – <http://mass.gov/>

The Legislature's web page – <http://www.state.ma.us/legis/>

Senate's Bill Text System – <http://www.state.ma.us/legis/billsrch.htm>

Legislative Tracking System – <http://www.state.ma.us/legis/ltsform.htm>

My personal website – <http://www.stanrosenberg.com/>