
The Rosenberg Report

Vol. LVI
February 22, 2008

Hello!

On Saturday, March 1st, I, along with State Representative Steve Kulik and members of Berkshire Connect, Inc., Pioneer Valley Connect, and The John Adams Innovation Institute at the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative, will host a broadband forum with FCC Commissioners Jonathan Adelstein and Robert McDowell at The Clarion Hotel and Conference Center in Northampton from 8:30 a.m to 3:30 p.m.

I am very pleased to be a part of this forum, and the timing could not be better. In the last few days the governor's \$25 million broadband initiative (click here for complete text: <http://www.mass.gov/legis/bills/house/185/ht04/ht04311.htm>) has begun moving through the Legislature and my colleagues, many of whom can't imagine life without broadband, are hearing once again about the underserved communities throughout the state. I am committed to making broadband access available in every city and town because it will be a significant part of our future prosperity, especially here in western Massachusetts. Broadband access would help western Massachusetts businesses and entrepreneurs compete in the 21st century economy and expand job opportunities in rural areas. In addition to the economic benefits, broadband access would also have a positive environmental impact by making telecommuting possible, which of course reduces the number of cars on the highways. But broadband access is also a matter of fairness. People, especially students, in rural areas should not be deprived of the educational opportunities afforded by broadband.

Plus, just think how much faster the Rosenberg Report will download on a high-speed connection.

The forum on March 1st is free, but because lunch will be provided, pre-registration is requested. To register, please contact Adele Burnes at 508-898-3228, xt. 1608, or e-mail her at burnes@masstech.org. You can find out more by going to Berkshire Connect's website www.bconnect.org and Pioneer Valley Connect's website www.pioneervalleyconnect.org.

Hope to see you there.

Yours,



February Focus

Higher Education Bond Bill

On Feb. 14th, the Legislature's Joint Committee on Higher Education approved a Higher Education Bond that earmarks \$321.6 million for renovations and new construction at the Greenfield Community College and UMass-Amherst campuses.

It's been a long time, too long, since we've had a bond bill that invests public dollars in the capital needs at our campuses. The result has been an epidemic of deferred maintenance and an increased financial burden on students. This must change. Our goal should be a higher education system that is affordable and state-of-the-art. This bond bill is a step in that direction.

The bond package would finance renovation, modernization and new construction projects that have been approved by the Board of Higher Education or the UMass Board of Trustees. Locally, those projects include:

* \$31 million for the renovation and modernization of the campus core building at GCC, as well as new construction of a maintenance building and expansion of the East Building;

* \$290.6 million for UMass-Amherst, including:

\$85 million for new classrooms

\$100 million for new science labs

\$12.6 million for repairs to Machmer Hall

\$41.750 million for renovations to Lederle Research Center

\$51.3 million for renovations to Morrill Science Center

The necessity for a higher education bond bill was a centerpiece of my work as co-chair of the Senate's Task Force on Public Higher Education in 2004-05, which outlined a comprehensive plan to re-invest in the state's public higher education system with the goal of positioning Massachusetts at the vanguard of the world's knowledge-based economies.

Our prosperity depends on our willingness to make the investments necessary to give students of modest financial means a chance at a world-class education. I am pleased that the Legislature and the Patrick administration are staunch allies in this effort.

The bill now goes to Joint Committee on Bonding, Capital Expenditures, and State Assets.

Safer Alternatives Bill

On Tuesday, Jan. 29th, the Senate approved a bill aimed at protecting the health of all Massachusetts residents through the reduction of toxic chemicals used in common household products, from plastics and cleaning products to cosmetics.

Making the environment safer means addressing big problems, like global warming, but it also means taking care of the toxins around the house. When there are safer alternatives to the products we use everyday, we should pursue those vigorously for the health of the planet and the personal health of our friends and families.

The Safer Alternatives bill (for complete text click here: <http://www.mass.gov/legis/bills/senate/185/st02/st02406.htm>) authorizes the Toxic Uses Reduction Institute (TURI) at UMASS Lowell to promote safer alternatives “in products manufactured for use and for sale in Massachusetts” through the annual assessment of existing substances in an effort to identify those that are the most toxic.

Additional steps built into the legislation allow the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to develop a Chemical Action Plan around priority toxic substances. The plan would include a determination on appropriate safer alternatives to use in place of specified toxic chemicals. Safer alternatives would be used only if they are found to be “technically or economically feasible”.

The DEP would be authorized to prohibit the sale or distribution of products from any manufacturer or distributor whose products contain a designated priority toxic substance.

Additional provisions of the bill include:

- The creation of a business leaders program that uses grant incentives to reduce or eliminate the use of toxic chemicals.
 - The establishment of a retained revenue account, allowing the Executive Office of the Environment and Energy Affairs (EOEEA) to collect fees associated with the implementation of this legislation.
 - The development of curriculum and training benefits for businesses and employees as a means to promote the growth of the safer alternatives industry in Massachusetts.
- The bill will now go to the House of Representatives.

Noteworthy

Big Dig Agreement

On January 23rd, Attorney General Martha Coakley announced a settlement with Big Dig management consultants and designers that requires them to pay more than \$450

million to resolve all pending criminal and civil claims by the federal government and the Commonwealth relating to the July 10, 2006 ceiling collapse, defects in slurry wall construction, use of out-of-specification concrete by certain contractors, failure to disclose financial information, and various cost recovery matters for deficient work.

(Click here for complete details

http://www.mass.gov/?pageID=pressreleases&agID=Cago&prModName=cagopressrelease&prFile=2008_01_23_big_dig_agreement.xml)

Unemployment Insurance Rates

On February 13th, the Senate voted to prevent a scheduled increase in the unemployment insurance rate, a move that will keep unemployment insurance rates at the same level this year as the previous four years and will save businesses \$153 million dollars this year and help stimulate job growth in a slumping economy.

The Commonwealth's unemployment insurance trust fund provides financial assistance to people who lose their jobs. The fund is supplied solely by employers who are required to pay fees to support the unemployment insurance program. The trust fund currently has a balance of \$1.2 billion.

The trust fund is healthy, and we can afford to freeze the rate without hurting the unemployed. We have to take advantage of this opportunity now. Economic forecasts are gloomy, and this measure will help businesses flourish and ultimately promote job growth.

The bill now goes to the Governor for his approval.

Employment Compensation

On February 12th, the Senate voted to ensure there can be no room for interpretation of existing law that protects the right of Massachusetts employees in wage disputes.

The current employee compensation law allows workers to recover triple the amount of actual damages if a company fails to pay an employee for work performed. Certain language in the law, however, has been interpreted to make the recovery of those damages optional instead of mandatory.

Triple damages in wage disputes, known as "treble damages", are required because of the serious financial consequences workers can face when earned pay is withheld by employers. People can be left without the ability to meet payments on their rent, mortgage, car or student loans. In some cases, people are unable to buy food or pay for heat. Multiple damages are awarded to compensate workers for these compounding costs.

The original intent of the law was to make multiple damages mandatory. This bill will make sure there is proper application of the law so that workers are protected, as well as employers.

The bill also benefits employers because it creates a level playing field for all businesses. Employers who delay, miscalculate or withhold payments from their workers can use that money to underbid competitors or lower costs. Such unfair competition can have devastating effects, especially for small businesses. By prohibiting such practices, it makes for fair competition in the marketplace.

The bill will go back to the House of Representatives for further action.

Bank Fee Exemption for Senior Citizens

On February 12th, the Senate voted to relieve certain financial burdens imposed on senior citizens applying for medical assistance. The legislation would change current law that requires seniors to pay a fee for bank records relative to their applications for MassHealth.

In order for seniors to complete applications for MassHealth benefits, they must obtain past bank statements at a cost that, by some reports, can exceed \$500 to meet the MassHealth application requirements. This legislation would eliminate such fees for seniors who present a letter from MassHealth requesting bank records.

These fees are an unnecessary burden to senior citizens. Many of these seniors are living on limited incomes and these additional expenses are often too much to absorb. This legislation will relieve the unnecessary hardship and improve the quality of life for these seniors.

Another negative side-effect of the existing fees can put seniors into life-threatening situations in which they are forced to reduce or even eliminate monthly medications in an effort to remain financially stable and meet their usual expenditures for food, heat, clothing and shelter.

The bill will go back to the House of Representatives for further action.

Vermont Yankee Update

Earlier this month, Attorney General Martha Coakley called on the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to address the issues raised in a recent Inspector General's report regarding licensing practices for nuclear power plants.

http://www.mass.gov/?pageID=pressreleases&agId=Cago&prModName=cagopressreleases&prFile=2008_02_15_nrc_igreport.xml I am pleased to see that other high-level state officials, including Public Safety Secretary Kevin Burke and Energy and Environmental Affairs Secretary Ian Bowles, are joining the chorus of concern that we in the western Massachusetts legislative delegation started several months ago about the re-licensing of old nuclear power plants, Vermont Yankee in particular.

Roundup

Mass2-1-1

The Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) and the Council of Massachusetts United Ways (COMUW) have agreed to utilize Mass 2-1-1 as the Commonwealth's primary telephone information call center during times of emergency. The easy to remember 2-1-1 telephone number will be utilized as a resource for human service and public safety/disaster response and planning agencies. It was designed, in part, to reduce the number of non-emergency calls made to 9-1-1.

With the change, the Secretary of State's Citizen Information Service staff will now have the responsibility to serve as liaisons between the Mass 2-1-1 staff and the Massachusetts Emergency Management Team (MEMT) when the State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC) in Framingham is activated for an emergency situation. Mass 2-1-1 will provide the latest emergency information and response to rumors through their call center and website.

This new partnership will offer citizens the opportunity for 'one-stop-shopping', with access to vital updated disaster information, numerous post-disaster programs, interpreter services, and call tracking of caller locations. Mass 2-1-1 will also have the ability to act as the registration site for spontaneous volunteers and donations from the public during an emergency or crisis.

Mass 2-1-1 was created by The Council of Massachusetts United Ways on behalf of 22 local United Ways serving every community of the Commonwealth. Seven years ago, COMUW embraced the national 2-1-1 program, as established by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and initiated by the United Way of America. The 2-1-1 phone number was established by the FCC as a nationwide number to call for non-emergency information and referral services. Currently Mass 2-1-1 operates its call center Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. with the ability to activate 24-7 during times of emergency in the Commonwealth. More information is available at www.mass211.org.

The Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) is the state agency responsible for coordinating federal, state, local, voluntary and private resources during emergencies and disasters in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. MEMA provides leadership to: develop plans for effective response to all hazards, disasters or threats; train emergency personnel to protect the public; provide information to the citizenry; and assist individuals, families, businesses and communities to mitigate against, prepare for, and respond to and recover from emergencies, both natural and man made. For additional information about MEMA, go to www.mass.gov/mema.

Department of Education Grants

On Feb. 19th, state education officials on awarded 10 grants, worth \$3.3 million, to spark interest in science and math fields at elementary and middle schools. The Massachusetts Board of Higher Education awarded the grants as part of its Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) Pipeline Fund, designed to increase teacher

preparation and student interest in STEM fields. Grants will fund engineering curriculum development, summer camps on biotechnology, and STEM teacher training. The grant winners include the University of Massachusetts.

More State Grants

Shelburne Falls Village Partnership - \$20,000

Earlier this month, the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs awarded a \$20,000 grant to the Shelburne Falls Village Partnership for the planning and design work for an observation area at the Glacial Potholes at the end of Deerfield Avenue in Shelburne Falls. The Partnership is composed of the Board of Selectmen of Shelburne, the Board of Selectmen of Buckland and the Board of Directors of the Shelburne Falls Area Business Association (SFABA).

The project includes a handicap accessible deck connected by walkways at the river's edge, an educational kiosk and/or interpretive displays, bank erosion mitigation, and a trail node area that will connect to a future spur of the Mahican-Mohawk Hiking Trail. The Partnership has also been awarded a \$5,000 grant from the Highland Communities Initiative (a program of the Trustees of Reservations) for much of the matching required for the EOEAA grant.

I'm pleased that the state is making another investment in Shelburne Falls, one of the great jewels of Massachusetts.

Northampton -- \$10,000 from the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs for engineering work to bury utilities at the city's Pulaski Park project, part of the larger Roundhouse Brownfields project.

WFCR Foundation (in Amherst) -- \$7,000 grant from the Department of Conservation and Recreation (with a \$5,950 local match) to develop a 10-part radio series on urban and community forestry in Massachusetts that would air on WFCR-FM (88.5) as part of its weekly natural history radio program, Field Notes.

Franklin Regional Housing and Redevelopment Authority -- \$15,000 emergency capital improvement bond funding from the Department of Housing and Community Development for the cost of repairing boilers and valves at the Authority's 667-3 Winslow Wentworth, Turners Falls development.

South Hadley Housing Authority -- \$20,000 technical assistance and emergency capital improvement bond funding to replace the roofs at the Authority's 667-3 Lathrop Village Development.

The state Department of Environmental Protection earlier this month made the following Municipal Sustainability Grant awards. These awards typically help communities with recycling projects:

Sunderland - \$6,842
South Hadley - \$1,801
Amherst - \$252
Colrain - \$454
Bernardston - 26 kitchen scrap buckets
Northampton - \$4,043
Deerfield - \$1,146
Greenfield - \$2,296

Home Rule Petitions

On Jan. 18th, the governor signed a bill establishing a sewer system capital improvement fund for the town of Hadley. <http://www.mass.gov/legis/laws/seslaw08/sl080009.htm>