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Letters



Area legislators back state budget

BY TRACY SEELYE
WEDNESDAY, JULY 06, 2011 01:34 PM

State legislators for Whitman and Hanson were among the 150 House members voting in favor of the conference committee budget of \$30.59 billion Friday, July 1. Two House members voted no, and the budget passed the state Senate by a 33-4 margin. Under the fiscal year 2012 budget, communities could see local aid restored to last year's levels through reversion funds if the section is not vetoed.

The budget recommendation — which Gov. Deval Patrick may amend through line item vetoes before signing off on it — must be signed by July 10,

If the local aid amendment survives such a veto, it would distribute about \$65 million to local cities and towns on a one-time only basis by Oct. 31. The formula through which the local aid funds would restore earmarks 50 cents from every dollar not spent during the previous fiscal year.

"Restoring local aid cuts was one of the principal reasons I decided to run for office, once I'd seen the negative affects to our schools and public safety departments due to continued reductions in prior years," said state Rep. Geoffrey Diehl, R-Whitman, who represents Whitman.

Whitman's Town Administrator Frank Lynam, took await-and-see approach, declining to try to speculate on what Gov. Patrick would do.

"Past experience has taught me not to count money until it is on the Cherry Sheet," Lynam said.

Even if additional local aid funds are sent to the towns, how the money is spent must be ultimately decided at special Town Meeting.

State Rep. Daniel Webster, a Pembroke Republican whose district includes Hanson, noted the budget includes no new taxes or fees, but said it continues the annual budget growth or about \$1 billion per year since 1995.

"Such growth is unsustainable and will eventually bankrupt the state," Webster said. "I reluctantly voted in favor of the bill."

Webster noted Chapter 70 funding for Whitman-Hanson Regional High School was increased by 7 percent in the approved budget. The special education circuit breaker was increased to \$213 million and regional school transportation was funded at \$43.5 million, Webster said.

"The state legislature needs to make a concerted effort to fund 100 percent of the cost of regional school transportation," Webster said. "This is one of the major incentives

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communities have to regionalize schools.”

State Sen. Thomas P. Kennedy, D-Brockton, agreed.

“Deliberations for the FY12 budget were some of the most difficult in recent memory,” Kennedy said in a statement Tuesday. “The Legislature as a whole was forced to make painful but necessary cuts to ensure essential programs continue to provide services for the most vulnerable citizens of the Commonwealth.”

Given the tough economic climate, Kennedy said he was encouraged to see the final budget include \$23,858,241 for the Whitman-Hanson Regional School District, an increase of \$75,736 from the previous year funding of \$23,782,505.

The budget also includes a Republican-backed municipal health insurance reform package aimed at helping cities and towns save money while retaining a “strong voice,” if not veto power, for employees and retirees.

Lynam said the reform would have little effect on Whitman town employees. Whitman is a member of the Mayflower Municipal Health Group.

“All plan design is conducted at the group level and we have a 1/31 vote in the design,” Lynam said.

Whitman now offers a 75/25 plan with a \$9,500 cap. State statute provides that no employee shall pay more than 50 percent of the cost of insurance.

“Because of the cap, we are well beyond the 75/25 split for family policies,” Lynam said. “As a result, individual plan participants pay 25 percent and family participants pay 50 percent of the premium.”

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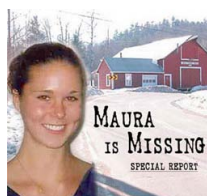


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