



Editorial: A pretty good state budget

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By traditional practice, the Massachusetts state budget is mostly produced in secret, debated in haste, and signed when most voters aren't paying attention. Those traditions held again this year.

Gov. Deval Patrick proposed his budget in January, then Ways and Means committees in the House and Senate huddled in the dark for several months on their versions, which were quickly debated, amended and sent off to a conference committee, which huddled in the dark for several weeks before another, even quicker, debate. Patrick signed the final \$32.5 billion spending plan Sunday in an empty State House.

The scoop on the big items most people care about is that taxes neither rise nor fall in this budget, and that local aid comes in 3.7 percent higher than last year. That's a relief to cities and towns, which finalized their budgets months ago hoping state aid wouldn't be cut.

By traditional practice, the Legislature's leaders also fold unrelated items into the budget. These often deserve a better debate than they get.

Two items included in this year's budget shouldn't get lost in the shuffle:

The Legislature adopted a version of Patrick's proposal to create a more unified community college system better positioned to bridge the "skills gap" that makes it hard for large employers to fill thousands of jobs. The version is a compromise, giving the governor less power than he had wanted to bring change to the 15 community colleges and providing just \$2.5 million — he'd asked for \$10 million — for the "middle skills" program. But it's a start.

The budget includes changes to the Community Preservation Act that CPA advocates have been pushing for years. The changes will make it easier for communities to use CPA funds to improve recreation facilities, and will shore up the state's CPA matching fund. The one-time infusion of \$25 million isn't ideal, but it's welcome.

Patrick made a few small vetoes that will be handled, probably without much fanfare, in the next week or so. While Southeastern Mass. lawmakers are most upset over Patrick's push to close Taunton State Hospital, the most regrettable in our view is his reduction, by half, of a one-time "salary reserve" payment to the state's lowest-paid human services workers. These workers, largely non-union employees of nonprofits that contract with the state, haven't had a real raise in five years. After Patrick's cut, they will get a bonus worth less than a dollar a day. That's one veto the Legislature should override.

We have plenty of complaints about the closed nature of the budget process. Some important items, including the underfunding of higher education and maintenance of the transportation system, went unaddressed. But Massachusetts has balanced its budget again, without tax increases or drastic program cuts, just 10 days into the new fiscal year, which is pretty good.