

STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE

MASS. HOUSE AGREES TO \$36.3 BILLION FISCAL 2015 BUDGET

By Andy Metzger
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STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, MAY 1, 2014....After adding more funding for the Department of Children and Families, an anti-gang grant program, and global warming preparedness, the Massachusetts House passed a \$36.3 billion annual budget 148-2 Wednesday night, sending it to the Senate for its markup.

Over three days of debate, the House dispatched with 1,175 amendments, and added roughly \$144 million to the bill that hit the House floor Monday with a \$36.2 billion bottom line, according to numbers provided by the House Ways and Means Committee.

The Senate usually debates its annual budget proposal in May, with a conference committee then named to produce a consensus spending plan in time for the July 1 start to fiscal 2015. Gov. Deval Patrick will have an opportunity to veto items in the budget and send others back with amendments before signing it. Patrick in 2007 signed his first budget, a \$26.8 billion bill, and this summer' s budget will be his last.

The House budget lopped off taxes on candy and soda as well as an expansion of the state' s bottle deposit law that Patrick had included in his budget proposal. The version that cleared the House around midnight Wednesday night also included a two-month tax amnesty program, legalized direct sales of wine and gave vineyards the right to offer customers samples of their wine.

Despite marathon sessions, public debate on the bill was infrequent, but at times charged with emotion. For the most part, lawmakers spent the week sitting idly in the House chamber, privately lobbying for amendments, and waiting for top House Democrats to produce meaty amendments for approval.

Amendments added to the bill created various beneficiaries. Speaker Pro Tem Patricia Haddad, of Somerset, won a one-time payment for her community to make up for the planned closure of the Brayton Point power plant and the accompanying loss of property taxes. Rep. Shawn Dooley, of Norfolk, won additional prison mitigation for his district, which has a disproportionate share of correctional facilities. Rep. Anne Gobi, of Spencer, secured additional funding for the state' s beehive inspection program.

A scattering of new policy proposals were also included in the bill, which would need to make it into the final version passed into law before taking effect. Rep. Shaunna O' Connell won inclusion of a requirement that the state' s Open Checkbook website report settlement payments paid by the state. A successful Rep. Bill Straus amendment changes the penalty for assaulting a public transit employee, which is currently between 90 days and 1.5 years, removing the minimum sentence and increasing the maximum sentence to 2.5 years. Rep. Denise Provost won unanimous support for restricting train transport of ethanol and requiring the development of an emergency management plan.

Republican Reps. Marc Lombardo, of Billerica, and James Lyons, of Andover, were the only members to

vote against the annual spending bill.

Having successfully added a delinquent taxpayer amnesty program and failed in an attempt to commit future state funds for local aid to cities and towns, House Minority Leader Brad Jones said he was pleased with the final product.

“ While if left to the devices of House Republicans, the budget passed by the House of Representatives would certainly have some different priorities, the fiscal plan advanced by the Legislature, and free from tax increases, represents an increased level of commitment to Massachusetts taxpayers and communities,” the North Reading Republican said in a statement.

House Speaker Robert DeLeo who began the week by calling for the resignation of the Department of Children and Families chief, praised the “ fiscally-prudent” budget for setting DCF on a better track.

“ We propose strong measures to care for the state’ s most vulnerable residents, including increased oversight and resources for the Department of Children and Families and funding to improve mental health and substance abuse programs,” the Winthrop Democrat said in a statement.

The three-day budget deliberations featured a heated debate over the nature of the legislative branch and whether it should be used to override a court decision in a child custody case currently in the news media spotlight. Discussion of whether to outlaw the granting of an in-state tuition rate to undocumented immigrants also occupied the attention of the 160-member chamber on Tuesday.

Both of those proposals failed to pass. Lawmakers voted 100-45 to study the proposal to ban in-state rates for undocumented immigrants.

On Wednesday, examples of bipartisanship as well as intraparty disagreement were on display. O’ Connell, an often unabashed champion of conservative issues such as stricter eligibility requirements for public benefits, praised a Democratic move to change one of her amendments.

After proposing to allow parents of newborns to call 911 for a no-questions-asked adoption, the Taunton Republican said she agreed with Democratic Rep. Garrett Bradley that the issue should be studied before being implemented.

Bradley said lawmakers are unclear whether the expansion of the Baby Safe Haven law would require child seats in police cruisers or other considerations. The move to study the issue rather than approve it drew a sharp rebuke from Democrat Rep. Christopher Fallon.

“ Is there a reason . . . why the majority party cannot endorse this kind of amendment?” asked Fallon, his voice thundering through the chamber. Fallon who lost a bid for an open Senate seat this year is not running for re-election.

Major spending items passed with little debate and nearly no opposition. Out of view of the public, House leaders cobbled members’ sundry amendments into nine packages. Tuesday was also a filing deadline for nomination papers, which meant amid the budget debate lawmakers found out whether they will face a challenge in their re-election bids this fall.

The so-called consolidated amendments added about \$16 million for education and local aid; \$3 million for administration, constitutional officers and transportation; \$6 million for energy and the environment;

\$18 million for social service and veterans; \$7 million for housing, mental health and disabilities; \$10 million for public health; \$43 million for health and humans services and elder affairs; and \$18 million for labor and economic development.

Members went on record in support of all those major amendments except for labor and economic development, which passed on a voice vote late Wednesday.

The economic development and labor language includes a variety of earmarks for civic and cultural organizations, including \$400,000 each for the Urban Leagues of eastern Massachusetts and Springfield, \$100,000 for the New England Public Radio Foundation, \$200,000 for a Methuen rail trail, and \$15,000 for Westfield on Weekends Inc.

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