

Legislative update from Sen. Matthew Houde – March 25, 2011

It has been an incredible month in Concord, and I imagine things will not slow down in April! The House Finance Committee has recommended its version of the budget to the full House, which will vote on it next week – the last week in March. When discussing the Governor’s proposed budget in last month’s article, I suggested that it could get worse - and indeed it has. The House Finance Committee has recommended a budget that spends \$519 million less overall than the Governor proposed (\$209 million less for the Department of Health and Human Services). I can’t begin to tell you what this means to the safety net the state currently provides - and what the implications are for down-shifting these costs to municipalities and/or hospitals. For example:

- Thousands of adults and children with mental illness will end up on a “wait list” and go without services – leaving only the most severe cases to be triaged;
- The state’s system for “children in need of services” – a category of children that are ordered by the courts to get treatment, guidance or counseling before they get into more trouble (end up in the criminal justice system or hospital or elsewhere) – would be eliminated;
- Foster grandparents and senior volunteer programs would be eliminated;
- Funding for ServiceLink, which provides free information and referrals for seniors and adults with disabilities would be eliminated (often referrals are made to federally funded programs, so this makes no sense from a fiscal point of view); and
- A program that provides meals, transportation, nursing and personal assistance to elderly housing residents would be eliminated.

This doesn’t include many other proposed cuts – to the arts, to state educational institutions, to health care providers among them. I believe the budget, perhaps more than any other legislation, reflects our priorities as a state. And while the Health and Human Services budget is indeed a large part of government expenses, the budget proposed by the House Finance Committee suggests that its priorities do not include people in need or who are the most vulnerable. Suffice-to-say, I am hopeful that the Senate will adjust the budget to better reflect what I believe is New Hampshire’s concern for all people.

There has also been substantial activity around public employees and the state’s retirement system. Proposals from the House would make state employees “at-will” employees at the end of their contracts if new collective bargaining agreements were not reached. Several hundred state workers protested this move at the Finance Committee hearing yesterday and more protests are planned for March 31. Since this is rather fluid at the moment, I will wait and write more fully on the topic in next month’s piece - including details of SB 3, the measure concerning public employees and the NH Retirement System that passed the Senate.

Other bills of note that have passed the House and will now make their way to the Senate include:

- Expanding the death penalty to include murders during home invasions

- Requiring parental consent before a minor can have an abortion
- Lowering the school dropout age to 16
- Repealing the state Rail Transit Authority (even though no state money is spent)
- Requiring the attorney general to join a lawsuit challenging the federal health care law (the Senate has passed a similar bill requesting – rather than requiring – such a challenge)
- Taking away the judiciary’s role in education funding (even supporters of a constitutional amendment giving the Legislature greater discretion in education funding are troubled by this component)
- Withdrawing New Hampshire from the regional environmental initiative to curtail greenhouse gases

For the record, I borrowed from the Concord Monitor’s editorial of March 22nd and the Valley News editorial of March 25 in compiling this list. Please do stay tuned...there is so much activity in Concord that you’ll want to be aware of and weigh in on!