

Musings from the House  
May 2009

The NH House spent three full days in deliberation in mid-April, voting on hundreds of Bills, which had received hearings and serious consideration and votes in House committees. The bills that passed the House have now moved on to the Senate for discussion and action.

Capturing the tension, emotion, eloquence, and occasional diatribes may not be completely possible. The budget clearly dominated the agenda, given the concerns about the economy and the cuts that needed to be made. The House Finance Committee had traversed the state, hearing from social agencies, art groups, town leaders, educators, health care providers and patients and their families about what damages cuts to programs would yield. The meetings held in Claremont were typical of meetings everywhere: we need the safety net of these funds to provide for the most fragile and vulnerable among us; cuts to essential services mean irretrievable losses of the gains made in the last few years; and, cities and towns need support to stay somewhat even with crumbling infrastructures.

The work done by the Finance Committees and the Ways and Means Committee deserves thanks and recognition. Working tirelessly, way into the night and with bi-partisan commitment, every agency budget was scrutinized and compared to the budget presented by the Governor. While many of the Governor's recommendations were maintained, the House committees responded to the needs of the citizens they heard and voted to replace some cuts to services. Make no mistake. There is something in this budget for everyone to dislike. The decision to charge retirees under age 60 for a portion of their health care costs has drawn the ire of this group. Representatives have also heard from constituents about the need for a broad based tax; the need to cut taxes and the budget even more; and the need to protect the retirement system for state employees (something we are committed to doing) while not increasing fees or taxes. The House heard over twenty amendments to the budget, none of which passed, and the House has now sent this budget to the Senate. The Senate will formulate its version and the two budgets will be reconciled in late spring.

Social issues also took central stage in this year's deliberations. Three of the bills introduced dealt with the repeal of the death penalty, gay marriage, and the protection of trans-gendered citizens. "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," aptly describes the arguments heard on the floor of the House.

Representatives spoke eloquently and from the heart about each of these issues. Rep. Renee Cushing of Manchester mesmerized the House with his recounting of the death of his father by gunfire and the development of his opposition to the death penalty. "To condemn another man to the loss of his father would not bring my father back to his chair...nor could I explain to my children that killing my father was wrong, but killing another man in our name was right." And, Rep. David Pierce spoke of his twenty year

loving relationship, the joy he and his partner share as parents, and the love and support of his extended family.

Serious arguments deserve serious hearing and debate. Fear mongering, trivializing difficult issues or demeaning those unlike us have no place in the work of the General Court. Arguments against the gender protection bill demeaned those born with undetermined gender and used fear as a motivator to vote against the bill, labeling this a “bathroom” bill that would make all women vulnerable. Arguments against gay marriage based on faulty reasoning, fear, and specious research also made it difficult to sit in our seats.

When the session ended, there was a great sense of having worked as hard as possible to do the right thing at the right time for the right reason and with a good deal of bipartisanship. Now that we have had ‘cross-over’ day, these bills will work their way through the Senate and the Senate bills will work their way through the House. In my committee, we will continue to work on licensing bills, retirement issues, and the state’s administration. I learned to my dismay this year that we still have a department in the legislative budget office that uses a ledger and pencils. And they think there’s fat in the budget! I want to thank all of you who have written or called to share your concerns. It matters.

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