

# Beacon Hill Roll Call

By Bob Katzen

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**THE HOUSE AND SENATE.** Last week was a very slow one on Beacon Hill as the House and Senate met only in brief, informal sessions.

The Legislature for many years has not scheduled any formal important sessions during the February school vacation week.

The official list from the State Treasurer's office of "per diems" collected by 160 state representatives in 2009 for "mileage, meals and lodging" expenses reveals that House lawmakers have collected a total of \$474,383. Per diems are paid by the state to representatives "for each day for travel from his place of residence to the State House and return therefrom, while in the performance of his official duties, upon certification to the state treasurer that he was present at the State House."

These per diems are paid to representatives above and beyond their annual base salary that in January 2009 was raised 5.5 percent from \$58,236 to \$61,439 under the terms of a constitutional amendment approved by the voters in 1998. The amendment requires legislative salaries to be increased or decreased biennially at the same rate as the state's median household income.

The new \$61,439 salary represents an increase of \$15,029, or 32 percent, over the \$46,410 salary that legislators received following approval of the constitutional amendment in 1998.

In addition, 62 representatives, or nearly 40 percent, of the 160 House members also receive additional stipends ranging from \$7,500 to \$35,000 for serving as committee chairmen or in other leadership positions. This group includes 53 Democrats and nine GOP members.

The 2009 statistics indicate that representatives received annual per diem payments ranging from \$20 to \$14,900. All 16 Republican representatives collected per diems. Of the chamber's 144 Democrats, 108 collected per diems while 36 Democrats have so far chosen not to apply for any money. State law does not establish a deadline that representatives must meet in order to collect the per diems.

The amount of the per diem varies and is based on the city or town in which a representative resides and its distance from the State House. These payments are taxable and range from \$10 per day for representatives who reside in the Greater Boston area to \$90 for some Western Massachusetts lawmakers and \$100 for those in Nantucket. Representatives who are from areas that are a long distance from Boston's State House often are the ones who collect the highest total of annual per diems. The Legislature in 2000 approved the doubling of these per diems to the current amounts.

Supporters of per diems say that it is a reasonable practice. They note that per diems had not been raised for many years despite the rising costs of travel, food, and lodging.

Opponents say that the very idea of paying legislators to drive to work is ridiculous — especially in light of the recession and the state's economy that have led to recent budget cuts of more than \$1 billion and the loss of thousands of jobs. They note that other state workers and most private workers are not paid additional money for commuting to and from work.

The representative who received the most money in 2009 is Representative Timothy Madden (Democrat from Nantucket), with \$14,900. The other top 13 recipients who top the \$7,000 mark include Representatives Daniel Bosley (Democrat from North Adams), \$13,860; William "Smitty" Pignatelli (Democrat from Lenox), \$9,360; Denis Guyer



(Democrat from Dalton), \$8,938; John Fresolo (Democrat from Worcester), \$8,712; Ellen Story (Democrat from Amherst), \$8,640; John Binienda (Democrat from Worcester), \$8,424; Joseph Wagner (Democrat from Chicopee), \$8,160; Christopher Donelan (Democrat from Orange), \$8,100; John Scibak (Democrat from South Hadley), \$7,860; Sarah Peake (Democrat from Provincetown), \$7,844; Todd Smola (Republican from Palmer), \$7,500; Demetrius Atsalis (Democrat from Barnstable), \$7,300; and Robert Koczera (Democrat from New Bedford), \$7,245.

## LOCAL REPRESENTATIVES' PER DIEMS FOR MILEAGE, MEALS AND LODGING IN 2009

The dollar figure next to the representative's name represents the total amount of per diem money that the state paid the legislator in 2009. The number in parentheses represents the number of days that the representative certified that he or she was at the State House in 2009.

A total of 36 of the state's 160 representatives did not list any days and did not request any per diems. This should not be construed to mean that they were never at the State House in 2009. It simply means that they chose not to list the number of days and not to request their per diems.

## Representative Richard Ross \$1,820 (70)

## ALSO UP ON BEACON HILL

**BAN CIRCUMCISION (S 1777)** — A public hearing is scheduled for Tuesday, March 2 on a measure filed by private citizen Charles Antonelli of Quincy that would ban male circumcision of anyone under the age of 18 unless medically necessary. The measure would impose a fine and/or up to 14 years in prison on anyone who violates this ban. Antonelli is the Massachusetts director of MGMbill.org — a group working to ban what it calls "male genital mutilation."

**ALLOW RESIDENT ALIENS TO VOTE (H 4306)** — The Election Laws Committee held a hearing on a bill, already approved by Amherst's town meeting, that would allow resident aliens over 18 years of age to vote in local Amherst elections, including ballot questions and races for School Committee and Board of Selectmen.

A resident alien is a legal foreigner who is a resident of the United States but does not have citizenship. The person would have to have a green card or have been in the United States for more than 31 days during the current year along with having been in the country for at least 183 days over a three-year period that includes the current year.

**PRIVATIZE STATE-OWNED GOLF COURSES (H 753)** — The Environment, Natural Resources, and Agriculture Committee is looking at a measure that would privatize the operation and maintenance of the state-owned Ponkapoag Golf Course in Canton and the Leo J. Martin Memorial Golf Course in Weston.

**DISPOSE OF UNUSED MEDICATION (H 850)** — The Environment, Natural Resources, and Agriculture Committee is also considering legislation requiring Massachusetts Collection Centers for Hazardous Household Products to accept prescription medication for disposal. The centers currently accept dozens of hazardous household products but do not accept unused medication. Supporters say that the old method of flushing unwanted medications down the toilet is irresponsible because wastewater treatment plants and septic systems are not designed to treat pharmaceutical waste. They argue that it is also dangerous to put the unused medication in with the regular trash.

**FREEZE UNEMPLOYMENT TAX (H 4470)** — The House and Senate approved and Governor Deval Patrick signed into law a bill freezing the unemployment insurance tax paid by employers at the current 2009 level through 2010 instead of allowing an automatic scheduled increase to take effect. The payments go into a fund that provides benefits to laid-off workers.

Supporters say that the freeze will save employers \$300 million and noted that without the freeze, the average employer contribution to the fund would jump \$300 — from \$584 to \$884 per employee. They argue that contributions are based on a formula and that even with this freeze, the contribution will still increase by an estimated \$120 per employee.

## QUOTABLE QUOTES

"You still look like you could go a few rounds with Sugar Ray Robinson, I'll tell you that."

— Senator Stephen Brewer (Democrat from Barre) joking at a legislative hearing with retiring State Auditor and former boxer Joe DeNucci.

"Yeah. He's dead."

— DeNucci responding to Brewer's compliment.

"Just imagine if you have a job like a meteorologist. You're right 25 percent of the time, and you make big bucks."

— Boston Mayor Tom Menino commenting on the weathermen following the Big Fake Snowstorm of 2010.

"I can't think of a single rep who is going to lose their seat."

— Representative Ellen Story (Democrat from Amherst) in a State House News Story when asked about the possibility of an anti-incumbent tide that would unseat state representatives and senators in Massachusetts.

**HOW LONG WAS LAST WEEK'S SESSION?** Beacon Hill Roll Call tracks the length of time that the House and Senate were in session each week.

Many legislators say that legislative

# Meetings

The following are some meetings that were posted or announced recently. Boards and committees can schedule meetings, cancel meetings, or alter the starting times of meetings on relatively short notice. Norfolk Town Hall is at One Liberty Lane in Norfolk Center. Next week is February vacation for public schools, a time when many town boards and committees choose not to meet.

## Monday, March 1

9:30 a.m. Council on Aging Senior Center  
 28 Medway Branch Road

7 p.m. Recreation Commission  
 Town Hall, Recreation Department offices, ground floor

## Tuesday, March 2

7:30 p.m. Board of Health  
 Town Hall, Room 124

8 p.m.  
 Economic Development Committee  
 Town Hall, Room 124

## Wednesday, March 3

6:30 p.m. Energy Committee  
 Town Hall, Room 124

7 p.m. Norfolk School Committee  
 Freeman-Centennial School library  
 70 Boardman Street

## Thursday, March 4

7:30 p.m. Advisory Board  
 Town Hall, Room 214

7:30 p.m. Planning Board  
 Town Hall, Room 124

sessions are only one aspect of the Legislature's job and that a lot of important work is done outside of the House and Senate chambers. They note that their jobs also involve committee work, research, constituent work, and other matters that are important to their districts.

Critics say that the Legislature does not meet regularly or long enough to debate and vote in public view on the thousands of pieces of legislation that have been filed. They contend that the infrequency and brief length of sessions are misguided and lead to irresponsible late-night sessions and a mad rush to act on dozens of bills in the days immediately preceding the end of an annual session.

During the week of February 15-19, the House met for a total of three hours and 24 minutes while the Senate met for a total of two hours and 50 minutes.

## Monday, February 15

No House session  
 No Senate session

## Tuesday, February 16

House 11:03 a.m. to 1:53 p.m.  
 Senate 11:07 a.m. to 1:50 p.m.

## Wednesday, February 17

No House session  
 No Senate session

## Thursday, February 18

House 11:01 a.m. to 11:35 a.m.  
 Senate 11:01 a.m. to 11:08 a.m.

## Friday, February 19

No House session  
 No Senate session

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