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June 8, 2020

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Senate Passes Bill to Preserve Municipal Governance During Ongoing COVID-19 Crisis

BOSTON -- The Massachusetts State Senate and Massachusetts House of Representatives passed a bill Thursday, June 4, 2020, to provide governance and fiscal flexibility for many municipalities grappling with public health challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. The legislation was signed by the Governor on June 5.

“I am very proud that the Legislature continues to deliver results for our partners in local government in this time of crisis,” stated **Senator Becca Rausch, Co-chair of Joint Committee on Municipalities and Regional Government (D-Needham)**. “This bill provides a number of vital components, such as virtual representative town meeting, quorum reduction for open town meeting, and additional budget flexibility. The bill also lifts up Bay Staters directly by extending the previously passed no-shutoffs provision to district governments and allowing expanded mail-in voting options for more local elections. I remain deeply committed to collaborating with colleagues in order to address the needs of our residents and our municipalities as we manage through this pandemic.”

“COVID-19 has disrupted so many aspects of our life, and I’m proud of this latest bipartisan effort to give our towns the flexibility they need to continue serving their residents without delay,” stated **Senate President Karen E. Spilka (D-Ashland)**. “I want to thank my legislative colleagues for their hard work and collaboration on this latest effort to address the ongoing public health pandemic. I look forward to it being swiftly signed into law.”

“In the face of unprecedented challenges it is vital that we empower local communities to effectively govern during this time, and this bill builds on the legislature’s commitment to do just that,” said **Senator Michael J. Rodrigues (D-Westport), Chair of the Senate Committee on Ways and Means**. “I applaud my colleagues in the House and Senate for working collaboratively to meet the urgent needs of the Commonwealth during the COVID-19 pandemic.”

"We appreciate our ongoing collaboration with municipal leaders to keep local government working safely during the time of COVID," said **President Pro Tempore Senator William Brownsberger (D-Belmont)**.

"Among the most important priorities that the legislature can address during this state of emergency is preparing the way for cities and towns to conduct the needed and necessary business of budgeting and governing for each community," said **Senate Minority Leader Bruce Tarr (R- Gloucester)**. "This multi-faceted bill, a product of collaboration and bipartisanship, gives the tools and flexibility that are needed across the Commonwealth now."

Building off of other legislation that gave municipalities operating flexibility during the ongoing COVID-19 public health crisis, the bill further protects public health and preserves the town meeting structure from continued disruptions caused by the state of emergency.

The bill includes the following provisions:

- Permits representative town meeting to take place virtually;
- Permits quorum reduction for open town meeting to no less than 10% and extends the quorum reduction to representative town meeting;
- Allows town meeting to be held outside the geographic limits of the town; and
- Permits a municipal election scheduled through June 31 to be extended to August 1 at the latest.

By providing our municipalities with this much-needed flexibility, the bill preserves public access to the proceedings of town governance and protects the public from the continued health risks associated with the COVID-19 outbreak.

The bill also provides our city governments with fiscal relief by allowing mayors to delay their normal budget submission deadline for FY 2021 in light of the state of emergency.

Finally, among other provisions, the bill strengthens the prohibition on terminating essential services for residents during the COVID-19 emergency and provides municipalities and regional school districts flexibility in paying school bus and other vendor contracts.

The compromise bill now heads to the Governor's desk.

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