

Letter: House took difficult, but responsible, action on budget

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To the editor:

Having completed one of the most difficult budget debates in the history of the commonwealth, we wanted to take this opportunity to address your Wednesday, April 29, editorial suggesting our vote to increase the sales tax by 1.25 percent was disrespectful of Governor Patrick and of our constituents.

Moreover, to suggest this vote was a laughing matter because a nervous freshman legislator made an off-the-cuff — and, yes, poorly chosen effort at self-deprecating humor — remark during his maiden speech was, at best, misleading

We made this vote after serious and deliberate debate; taking into account all sides, and working to balance the needs of and input from our constituents.

As for Governor Patrick's demands for reform, the House, as promised by Speaker DeLeo, has taken up and passed major bills including transportation, ethics and pension reforms in the last ten weeks. In addition, the budget that was passed included reforms — including the elimination of the Quinn Bill for new hires, socking away 50 percent of future capital gains annual growth to the rainy-day fund and reducing the state's share of health insurance premiums for state employees, including ourselves.

Does it mean there will be no other reforms? No.

Did we agree with Governor Patrick on every front? No.

That's the legislative process. A governor — whether Democrat or Republican — does not call the shots alone. The Legislature is an equal branch of government by design.

Yes, our process is a little messy because we have 160 members who each represent 40,000 citizens who have very different opinions. We need 81 votes to get things done. Governor Patrick's series of tax proposals on gas, candy, and soda could not get 81 votes. However, we clearly heard the need for reform and revenue from our constituents and the governor.

We passed reform measures and stayed financially cautious trying to prevent our tax dollars from paying for higher financial fees and penalties related to transportation bond obligations. Rhetoric may fly, but this is the work at hand.

As for our constituents, we are being respectful and forthright. It was "unfathomable" to continue to ignore transportation debt and its impact on the lives of our constituents and on our communities. That is what is disrespectful of citizens. Increasing revenues to stop \$7 tolls and restore local aid to our cities — and being honest about how to pay for it — is being respectful.

Even with increased revenues, we have cut almost \$1.2 billion out of this budget. As revenues continued to decline in April, the Senate may have to cut up to another billion out of the budget. The budget decisions are far from complete.

We get calls daily from constituents regarding education, health insurance, housing and every other problem that comes with such a dire economy. Our vote was to restore some local aid, some necessary human services, and to dedicate \$300 million to transportation to prevent draconian toll and fare increases — no laughing matter to our constituents. Perhaps you disagree with whether this budget represents the fairest or best policy. You may disagree with our priorities. We can accept that. But please do not suggest we consider this a laughing matter or disrespectful of citizens or the governor we supported.

The budget process is an open debate about our priorities as a society. It is necessary to a democratic society whose needs change over time. We will continue to question proposals — whether the governor's or our colleagues in the Legislature — and may even revisit some. We will continue to make tough choices in the weeks and months ahead.

Rep. John Keenan

7th Essex District (Salem)

Rep. Mary Grant

6th Essex District (Beverly)

Editor's note: The House late Friday voted 137-19 to approve a \$28 billion state budget for the fiscal year that begins July 1. The Senate is expected to take action on the budget by the middle of this month.)

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