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Rep. Smola supports passage of \$49.7 billion House budget for Fiscal Year 2023

BOSTON – Representative Todd M. Smola (R-Warren, Ranking Member, Committee on Ways & Means) recently supported a \$49.7 billion state budget for Fiscal Year 2023 that provides for increased local aid, significant funding investments in critical state programs, and the implementation of several major policy initiatives, including a ban on child marriage.

The preliminary budget proposal was engrossed by the House of Representative on a vote of 155-0 on April 27, following three days of debate on over 1,500 amendments.

The House budget provides just under \$6 billion in Chapter 70 education aid to cities and towns, which represents a \$494 million increase over current funding levels, and boosts minimum per pupil aid to \$60 per pupil. It also includes nearly \$1.2 billion in Unrestricted General Government Aid (UGGA) to support other essential municipal services. Representative Smola noted that under the House spending proposal for the new fiscal year that begins July 1, Brimfield will receive \$1,388,436 in direct education aid and \$440,063 in unrestricted state aid; Holland will receive \$984,946 in education aid and \$227,818 in unrestricted state aid; Palmer will receive \$11,173,122 in education aid and \$2,263,633 in unrestricted state aid; Sturbridge will receive \$4,243,483 in education aid and \$874,480 in unrestricted state aid; Wales will receive \$1,170,688 in education aid and \$266,603 in unrestricted state aid; Ware will receive \$12,335,233 in education aid and \$1,948,695 in unrestricted state aid; and Warren will receive \$1,021,211 in unrestricted state aid.

Representative Smola noted that the House budget fully funds 2/6th of the goal rate for Chapter 70 funding to meet the state's obligations under the Student Opportunity Act (SOA). It also offers additional education support for municipalities by funding the Special Education Circuit Breaker at \$441 million, a \$47.3 million increase over the current fiscal year, while fully funding charter school aid at \$243.8 million, which represents an increase of \$89.2 million over current spending

levels. Regional school transportation is funded at \$77.8 million, and homeless student transportation at \$22.9 million.

Other funding highlights from the budget include:

- \$200.3 million for the elder home care program;
- \$11.8 million for the elder nutrition program;
- \$23.5 million for grants to local Councils on Aging, with a formula;
- a \$70 million rate increase for the state's childcare providers;
- \$115 million for the school breakfast program, including summer food programs;
- \$15 million for child care resource and referral agencies;
- \$7.5 million for the Tomorrow's Teachers program to provide scholarships for people committed to teaching in the public schools;
- \$156 million in higher education scholarship funding;
- \$326 million for state universities, \$337 million for community colleges, and \$653 million for the UMass system;
- \$188.6 million for the Bureau of Substance Addiction Services;
- \$5.1 million for climate adaptation and preparedness; and

Citing strong state tax revenue collections, Representative Smola supported a series of tax relief amendments to help Massachusetts residents who are struggling with rising consumer prices, but all were defeated during floor debate. Among the tax relief measures voted on were proposals to:

- suspend the state gas tax for 60 days;
- suspend the gas tax until the average price reaches \$3.70 a gallon;
- double the estate tax threshold from \$1 million to \$2 million;
- reduce the tax rate on short-term capital gains from 12 percent to 5 percent;
- increase the Senior Circuit Breaker Tax Credit to \$1,755; and
- provide farms with a fuel tax rebate for the operation of farm equipment

While no tax relief measures were included in the final House budget, the spending proposal incorporates several new policy proposals, including language to ban child marriage, which is currently allowed under state law so long as the child's parents grant permission. According to Representative Smola, six other states already ban child marriage, including Rhode Island and New York, which passed laws to prohibit this practice in 2021.

The House budget also calls for incrementally increasing the \$2 million cap on the Conservation Land Tax Credit, which has helped preserve 14,110 acres of critical natural resources in Massachusetts as permanently protected open space, providing an important tool to help promote the Commonwealth's long-term climate goals through carbon sequestration. Under the House proposal, the cap will increase to \$5 million over a three-year period to help address the current backlog of applications, with the \$2 million cap to be reinstated in 2034.

Another policy proposal included in the House budget calls for the development and implementation of a secure common application portal for individuals to simultaneously apply for

state-administered needs-based benefits and services offered by a variety of state agencies. This includes MassHealth coverage, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), veterans' services benefits, child care subsidies, housing subsidies, fuel assistance and other needs-based health care, nutrition and shelter benefits.

In addition, the House budget directs the Health Policy Commission to conduct an analysis and issue a report on the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on behavioral health-related boarding in acute care hospital settings, including boarding in emergency departments, medical surgical units and observation units. The commission is due to report by July 1, 2023 with its recommendations on how to address the burden on acute care hospitals, outcomes for patients with behavioral diagnoses, and the quality of care for patients boarded in acute care settings.

The budget now moves to the Senate, which is expected to begin debating its own spending proposal in late May. For additional information please contact Representative Smola at Todd.Smola@mahouse.gov or (617) 722-2100.

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