



State's real issues getting short shrift

By Charles D. Chieppo

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With three gubernatorial debates down, we've heard a lot on matters like abortion and presidential politics — important issues, but not ones the next governor can do much about — and very little on a series of problems about which he or she will need to make critical decisions. Here's a wish list of issues that deserve to be discussed in the two debates that remain.

Barriers to entrepreneurship About 40,000 Massachusetts businesses are owned by low-income entrepreneurs. These small businesses are a key to the wealth and job creation that could revitalize our cities. Currently, state and local governments make it harder for them to succeed by placing unnecessary obstacles in their path. Some entrepreneurs must comply with up to 100 permit, licensing, and regulatory requirements just to get started.

These regulations rarely address performance, quality, safety, or public health issues. An African-style hair braider, for example, must spend \$5,000-\$8,000 and countless hours for the course that is required to become a licensed cosmetologist, even though no part of the course has anything to do with African hair braiding. With Massachusetts facing a deepening recession, what would each candidate do to reduce the barriers to starting and growing a business?

The human services crisis The commonwealth will spend about \$9.5 billion this year to provide health and human services, \$80 more per capita than neighboring Connecticut. Yet salaries for direct-care workers are almost 25 percent lower than in Connecticut, resulting in turnover rates here of up to 50 percent. Low wage rates mean our most vulnerable citizens are often cared for by a revolving door of employees who sometimes lack even basic reading and writing skills.

The culprit is an unwieldy and irrational bureaucracy that results in overhead eating up far too many of the dollars meant for direct care. During an earlier debate, Mitt Romney called for an overhaul of the commonwealth's Health and Human Service bureaucracy.

The MBTA The MBTA faces a staggering \$4 billion debt, a \$3.2 billion maintenance backlog, and \$2.5 billion worth of mandated expansion projects. According to an analysis by the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation, it is unlikely the T will be able to afford even one of those projects. Its operating budget is squeezed by labor costs that are among the highest in the nation and legislation that limits its ability to reduce those costs.

Despite a list of required expansion projects that state taxpayers are likely to pay for, a recent transportation bond bill included funding for a new \$720 million commuter rail line connecting Boston with New Bedford and Fall River — one of the few proposed projects the T is not required to build. Shannon O'Brien has said that priority must be given to improving the current system.

The Hynes Convention Center Much has been made of the lack of bookings at the new Boston Convention and Exhibition Center. Less attention has been paid to the similar plight of the Hynes Convention Center, which has just seven shows booked for 2007.

Boston is not the only city to come up short in its attempt to fill two convention centers. No city in the nation — not even those that do several times more convention business than Boston — successfully supports two publicly owned

convention facilities. Still, many of the same Back Bay businesses that pushed for a new center are now waging a campaign to save the Hynes.

It's a hard case to make on the merits. Between debt service and its annual operating subsidy, total state support for the Hynes will be nearly \$35 million this year, a number that will only increase as business declines. Beginning in 2004, that sum would be in addition to \$69-\$85 million in similar subsidies for the BCEC.

That's not all. Construction of a proposed "slingshot ramp" off the Massachusetts Turnpike that would provide BCEC convention-goers with easier access to Back Bay hotels checks in at another \$100 million. As the commonwealth contemplates additional tax increases and/or further cuts to basic services, bidding on proposed corporate welfare for Back Bay businesses begins at \$135 million and will only increase. Mitt Romney has already called for selling the Hynes.

Addressing these issues is just a starting point for solving the estimated \$2 billion shortfall the commonwealth faces next year. The new governor will take office under unusually difficult conditions, and forcing the candidates to weigh in on some of our most vexing problems now would provide us with valuable insight on how each might address the challenges ahead.

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