

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AT AMHERST
OFFICE OF THE FACULTY SENATE

From the 654th meeting of the Faculty Senate held on May 18, 2006.

ADDRESS BY REPRESENTATIVE STEPHEN KULIK (D-WORTHINGTON)

Good afternoon! I have to say that I am a little surprised to see so many people here on such a beautiful day. You are to be commended for that. It is really nice to be with you. It has been at least a year, if not more, since I had a chance to talk with you. I am going to be fairly brief in my remarks because I always enjoy the conversation that we can have. I enjoy your questions and comments about what is going on on Beacon Hill, in terms of public higher education, the University, or any other political issues that you would like to talk about. I wanted to thank your Rules Committee for a very enjoyable lunch that we had earlier today and a very stimulating conversation about higher education. I always learn something when I come to this campus. I was here last Friday when the delegation met with the campus unions over at the Campus Center. It was a very productive discussion, I think. I look forward to the same today.

The last few years when my colleagues in the regional delegation and I have come to talk with you, it has been pretty much that we have been the bearers of bad news, one year after another, since the recession began in 2001. Higher education took such a major hit in state spending over the last several years. We had some good news recently with the funding of collective bargaining agreements and we are almost caught up to that completely. That has moved through the process a little more swiftly than in the past without the snags that we encountered during the rough economic years. I think the bright news right now is in the state budget. If you think of the state budget as a football game with four quarters, we are just entering the third quarter. The Governor opens the first quarter with his filing in January and then the House does its budget in the second quarter, which we completed debate on about four weeks ago. The Senate budget came out yesterday and will be debated next week. The fourth quarter and the end of the game is the Conference Committee and it goes to the Governor and he signs it. He will probably veto portions of the appropriations bill. Then we will come in, and usually we will override virtually everything he might veto. That is the beauty of having a divided government, I guess, especially when we have more people than he does. The budget for the University and for higher education is up this year. The Governor's was increased over Fiscal 2006. The House did even better than that. As is usually the pattern, the Senate does better than the House. The Senate just released its numbers yesterday and the bottom line is that the Senate is very close to the House. They are practically identical in terms of the amount of the state appropriation for the University. The big difference is that the Senate has included in its budget the Higher Education Reform Act – the basic provisions of Senate Bill 2036. They have included tuition retention, which is part of the recommendation of that bill, and something that I have always supported as long as it is a firm and long commitment and as long as the employees are still considered a state expense and not something that the campus is responsible for. That is true, there is outside language in the Senate budget that does that, as well. The amount of the tuition retention that is added to the Senate budget is about \$49.2 million for the UMass system, in total, about \$86 million for all of public higher education. That is the major difference one sees in the budget numbers between the House and the Senate. Other than that, on the appropriation figure, we are very, very close. It is good news. After so many dark years of looking at budget cuts, or level funding, or funding only collective bargaining commitments, we finally see light at the end of the tunnel. It is in the context of a gradually-improving state economy -- one that is bringing in revenues higher than we expected. The benchmark revenues that we have looked for over the past year have been exceeded and that is great news. But it is not something that takes us out of the woods, yet, in terms of long-term stability in the state budget. We hear some people talk about, "Well if we have that much surplus, if we have revenue coming in at such a healthy clip, we can certainly afford to cut the income tax back to 5%, which the voters voted for in 2000." We cannot do that. We still have a structural deficit in Massachusetts, as can be seen by the fact that to put these budgets together, the House used \$275 million from our reserves and the Senate even more - they used \$350 million. Those reserves should be at about \$2.5 billion if we try to have 10% of our state budget in reserves.

We are not there yet. I think it is irresponsible and premature to even begin talking about tax cuts when we have not restored the cuts we have made to investments in higher education, local education, local aid, public health, and so forth. This is a year when we make good on investments in those particular key areas and begin to restore some of the cuts that came in fiscal 2002 and beyond. We cannot get into a debate about whether this is a time for tax cuts because we have a billion dollars more in revenue coming into the state than we expected. We have to make good on rebuilding the damage that was done in the last few years. First and foremost, our cities and towns and local school systems, and higher education took, by far, the lion's share of the budget cuts in those years. Also in the House budget -- I believe also in the Senate budget -- we have increased state scholarship aid by \$4.6 million and we have continued and increased the earmark that is in there for people who want to go into early childhood education. I know that is important on this campus.

I will talk a little bit about the Senate Task Force and the Higher Education Bill. As I said, that has been implemented in the proposed Senate Budget that will be debated next week. The Senate passed the bill after it came out of the Higher Education Committee. Many of you may know that this year, this legislative session, when we convened in January of 2005 for the new session, the House and Senate leadership created a new committee devoted entirely to higher education. Prior to that, we had one Education Committee that did everything from early childhood up through higher education. I think it was an important statement on the part of the leadership and the membership to embrace that concept to create a separate committee that could give higher education the attention and the due diligence as we look at various proposals and spending levels that it deserves. We have had terrific leadership on the House side with Representative Kevin Murphy of Lowell chairing that Committee and, on the Senate, Robert O'Leary, a Senator from the Cape. They are people who have had extensive experience in higher education and have been doing a great job. They took the Senate Task Force, crafted a bill, put it out, and it went immediately to the Senate where it was debated, amended, and passed. It is now in the House Ways and Means Committee, because there is a fiscal component to this. There is a long-term commitment, over seven years, to reach full funding through a formula that is contained in the bill. The Senate made several changes and amended the bill in ways that we have some concerns about. My own personal concerns are around some of the issues surrounding campus construction. The Senate deleted some of the provisions that would allow appropriations for capital expenditures to go to the UMass Building Authority, for example, and to use alternative methods of construction and not have to go through the very time consuming and often very costly and burdensome building regulations that the state has through DCAM. That has been a benefit for some projects on this campus when we have been able to short-circuit some of the state regulations which would really hinder the expedient construction of much needed buildings. That is something we are concerned about on the House side. We are also concerned about whether or not we can afford to do this in seven years with all of the other initiatives we are undertaking. The Ways and Means chairman and I have talked about this and he is very committed to trying to do this in as quick a way as possible. I think the Senate has set a high bar for us. It will become part of the conversation, both during the budget conference and also within the Ways and Means Committee because, if they report out a bill and take it up on the floor, it could be subject to another conference committee. One thing that the Senate and House differ on is, in the last two years, we, on the House side, have tried to minimize the uses of outside sections of the budget to achieve any sort of major statutory change. Certainly, the Higher Education Reform Bill is a major statutory change in the way the Commonwealth operates. We may not want to go along with the Senate and do those structural statutory changes in the budget but to do them separately as a stand-alone bill. Nonetheless, I think the funding commitments you have seen, which are intricately meshed with that, look very positive for the University and for all of public higher education. We are very pleased about that. Should we get the Higher Education Reform Bill through at this point, we will see a continual increase in funding over the next seven years so that we can finally begin to address some of the unmet needs within the system and within all of higher education.

I wanted to mention a question that was asked at lunch today, that I have been thinking about in the last hour or so, which was what do my colleagues, who are not particularly identified with campuses or with higher education, think about what is going on here at the University these days? It is always an interesting question. When I first went into the legislature, people were still talking about when the students trampled the flowers. I am happy to say that has finally been forgotten. I think everyone who was around then is gone.

A few years ago, I used to hear a lot about students not being able to get into the courses they wanted or needed and that many students had to stay here for several years beyond four years just to get their required course work done. I do not really hear those anymore and my sense is that that is a situation that has improved tremendously in the last few years. I am very glad to hear that. I do not hear those complaints from parents and I do not hear my colleagues in the legislature complaining about it either. I think that, in general, the impression that people have of this campus is extremely positive. I think people no longer question the quality of the teaching and the research that goes on here. People understand what the University's mission is much more clearly than they did a decade ago. There is no longer the sort of muddled view of the entire 29 campus system and not understanding the distinctive roles that the community and state colleges play and how different the University is. I think for this campus, in particular, there is an understanding of how we are different than the other campuses within the system. As the flagship campus, I know that is something we want to keep very much on the front burner, that this is the major research institution. We have many more students than the other campuses, we take the lion's share of the system budget, and we are the campus that the reputation of the University of Massachusetts system rests on. The quality that has been built here by you and everyone affiliated with this campus is being much more widely appreciated by my colleagues from wherever they may be in the state. Largely, that is due to the feedback that they get from parents and students. For many years, it has been a concerted effort on the part of the campus community to get students and parents more politically engaged around the state as advocates for the University, whether it is through the regional meetings with legislators to educate them about what the issues are on this campus, what is unique about this campus, and what its needs are. I think that has paid off very well. Our legislative leadership appreciates this campus very much. Speaker Salvatore DiMasi has been here on campus several times in the year and a half since he has become Speaker. The Chairman of Ways and Means, Robert DeLeo, has been here. Representative DeLeo is a very important guy because he will be at the table in those conference committees that are discussing both the appropriations levels, issues of tuition retention, the issues contained in the Higher Education Reform Bill, and so on. He has been here and he knows the Chancellor well. You have great advocates for this campus who are frequently in the State House, whether it is Chancellor Lombardi or your state relations staff. They are no strangers and they are there for us when we need information and resources as well. I have to say that not only is the state of our appropriations and our budget much more positive, but I think that overall perception of this campus and of public higher education is really on the upswing as well. I think it is a good time to be advocating for public higher education. You are not fighting a rear guard battle anymore, just keeping up the good work you do. Thank you all very much for what you do for the students, for all of us in the Legislature, and for what you do to contribute to the quality on this campus. It is much appreciated.