Demystifying the State Budget

League of Women Voters of Massachusetts

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Background

Eliza is State Senator Pat Jehlen's budget & policy advisor. She has served in this role for nearly 4 years, helping the Senator plan for budget and pass priority legislation.

Academic History

B.A. in Economics, University of New Haven
Juris Doctor, Suffolk University Law School

Policy Areas

Housing, environmental policy, criminal justice, LGBTQ+ rights, education, and more!

Who I Am...

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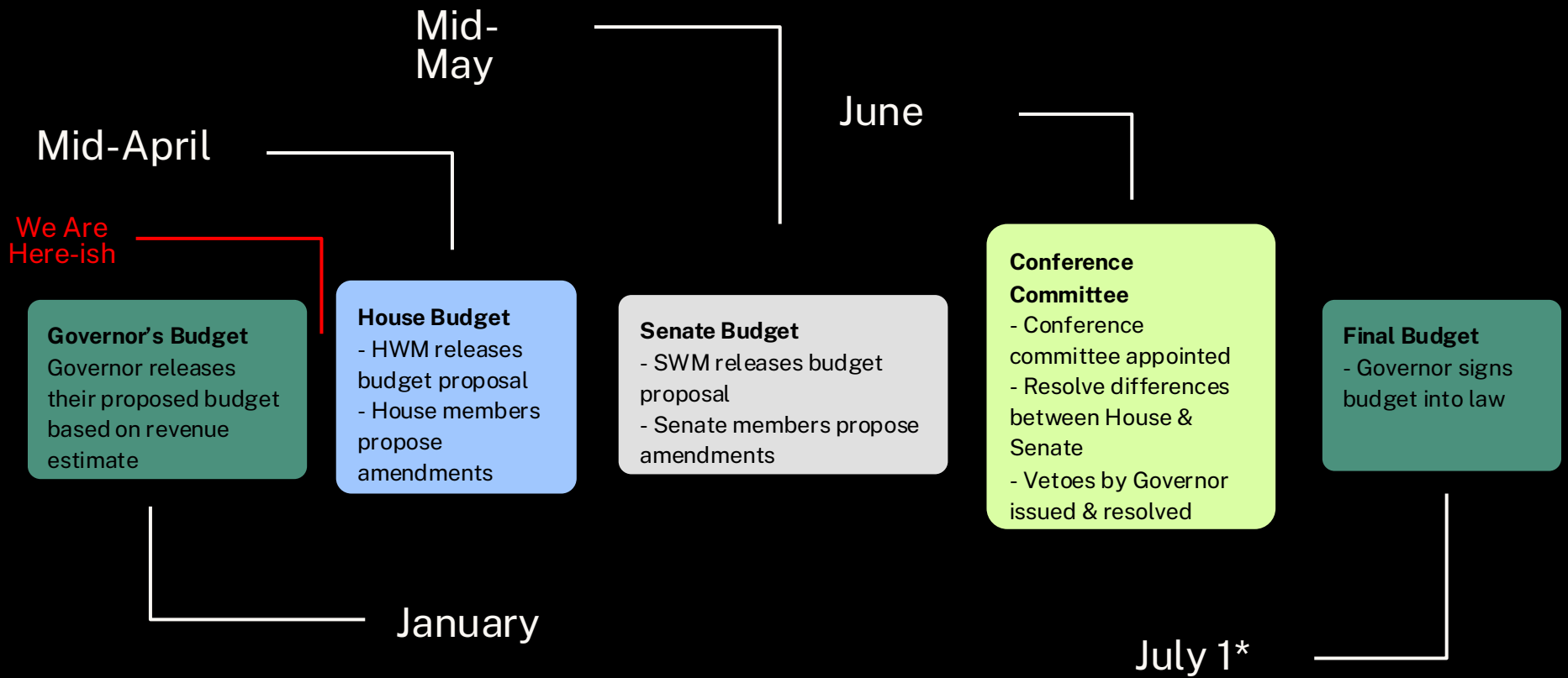
The State Budget is a major piece of legislation that appropriates funds to various state-run programs and partnerships. It is constitutionally mandated that we pass a “general appropriations act” **every year**. These programs and partnerships include schools, transportation, the judiciary, and other essential services.

What is the budget?



Budget Roadmap

Governor's Budget

- Governor submits a budget proposal to the House of Representatives based on estimated revenue numbers
  - H1 or H2 depending on which stage in the 2-year leg. cycle we are in
- Once published, House and Senate Committees on Ways & Means hold joint hearings on the proposal
  - Multiple hearings broken up by topic/executive branch
  - Public can submit testimony, with due dates related to the hearing topics

House Budget

- While these hearings are ongoing, the House Committee on Ways & Means (HWM) will review the Governor's proposal and develop their own recommendations
- HWM will then release this proposal to the entire State House of Representatives for a floor debate and final vote
    - Representatives can propose amendments to the budget, which typically will:
        - Increase funding for a particular item
        - Change language in a line item
        - Earmark funds for specific purposes
        - Add policy sections
- Once passed by the House, this amended budget proposal will be sent to the Senate

- TL;DR: copy & paste the House Budget slide
- The House's budget proposal is delivered to the Senate Committee on Ways & Means (SWM), where the process from the House is mirrored; SWM will review the Governor's proposal and the House's, then propose their own budget recommendations
- Senators can attempt to amend those recommendations in a similar process
- Once the Senate finalizes their version of the budget, we are now left with two versions: the House Budget and the Senate Budget. Almost always, there are significant differences between the two. In order to resolve these differences, the proposals are sent to...

Senate Budget

Conference Committee

- For all bills passed in both branches of the legislature, if there is a difference between them, a Conference Committee is appointed
- Each branch appoints 3 members to represent them, with 1 member being from the minority party
- This 6 member committee creates a compromise budget, incorporating aspects of both budgets
- This compromise budget is sent back to the House and Senate to be voted on one last time
- If accepted, the budget will be returned to the Governor

Final Budget

- When the Governor is presented with the House & Senate's final budget, they have 10 days to take some action:
  - Approve the budget
  - Veto the budget as a whole
  - Veto or reduce specific line items
  - Propose amendments
- If the Governor vetoes or proposes amendments, these can be overridden by the legislature with a 2/3rds majority in each chamber
- Officially, this whole process is meant to be wrapped up by July 1st, but it often goes past that timeframe. The final budget is almost always finalized by the end of July

So what do you do?

Advocate!

1.

Be consistent. Just because you got what you wanted at one step in the process does not mean it is guaranteed. Follow your work until the very end.

2.

Tell stories. Numbers and data are helpful, but they can also be abstract. If you are advocating for a specific program, tell a story about what it has done for you/your community/the State.

3.

Build connections. Legislators are more responsive to people they know and have a working relationship with. Work with other groups with similar goals and establish a movement.

4.

Don't give up. The legislature is a slow moving behemoth that in recent sessions tends towards fiscal conservatism. If at first you don't succeed, try and try again.

Massachusetts Budget & Policy Center

Governor's FY27 Budget Recommendation

State Legislature Budget Site

These websites are important for tracking the budget process and understanding the contents of the budget. Keep track of where the budget is in the process in order to know who is best to talk to **right now**.

Important legislative offices:

House Ways & Means

Speaker of the House

Senate Ways & Means

Senate President