

Massachusetts Shelter Bill Negotiators Have Final Deal

By Sam Doran

State House News Service

Top Democrats expect to file a compromise Wednesday on a bill (H 4582) designed to continue funding the state's overrun emergency family shelter and implement reforms to cut costs by limiting how long families may stay in shelters.

As the News Service first reported, lawmakers working on a fiscal 2024 supplemental budget (H 4466 / S 2711) picked up the paperwork needed to file a deal Wednesday morning.

In a joint statement Wednesday afternoon, lead conferees Sen. Michael Rodrigues and Rep. Aaron Michlewitz said they were finalizing details of the compromise in order to "timely" file the new language "for the House and Senate to consider the report tomorrow."

Both branches will be holding formal sessions Thursday. Under the Joint Rules, a conference report would need to be filed by 8 p.m. Wednesday in order for the branches to take it up anytime after 1 p.m. Thursday.

"I'm not going to get into specifics, but I think you heard that they picked up a jacket. Usually that's a good signal. And I think a deal will be done in short order," Senate President Karen Spilka told the News Service in the afternoon.

Known as a conference jacket, the blank form is used to gather signatures from House and Senate negotiators to finalize a deal. Retrieving an unsigned jacket from the clerk's office usually indicates that a six-person negotiating committee is close to final agreement.

Rep. Paul Donato of Medford, chair of the Second Division, said he believed a supp deal was on the radar for this week.

"I mean, we're here, and we're going to be here for a while. Time to do the supp budget and get it out of the way," Donato said during a recess in the House's first budget debate session of the week.

The six-person committee, chaired by Michlewitz and Rodrigues, held its first meeting April 1 after the branches passed competing versions of the bill in March.

In its version, the Senate proposed making an \$863 million state escrow fund available to fund family shelters through next fiscal year. The House proposed using \$245 million from escrow savings to cover the shelters until the current fiscal year ends this summer. The bills take different approaches to proposed limits on how long families can remain in the emergency shelters. Also tied up in the conference talks are provisions related to streamlined licensing for outdoor dining at restaurants and the authorization for restaurants to sell alcoholic beverages to go.

Current appropriations for the shelter system are expected to run out "sometime mid- to end of April," Rodrigues said this month, adding that the Healey administration has "other flexible funds that they can use."

Sen. Patrick O'Connor of Weymouth, one of two Republicans on the conference committee, told the News Service that he learned details of a House-Senate compromise Tuesday and decided to withhold his signature from the jacket.

"You know, we're in tough financial times, and this is a large amount of money that the state's been spending on this, and will continue to spend on this. And I would like to see more actionable plans put in place to see where the end-game is here," he said.

O'Connor said he wants to see state officials "be louder" in calls for assistance to the federal government and the state's delegation on Capitol Hill.

"We do not have the financial resources to do it alone," O'Connor said. "And until we have a long-term plan in place, I cannot support the continued spending of this much of our state resources."