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For Immediate Release

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April 3, 2020

Bill to keep local government running during COVID-19 pandemic now on Governor's desk
Tax filing deadline extended; beer & wine take-out allowed at restaurants, bars

BOSTON – Legislation to help municipal government continue to operate and provide essential services to Massachusetts residents during the COVID-19 global pandemic was signed by Governor Charlie Baker on Friday, April 3rd.

House Bill 4598, *An Act to address challenges faced by municipalities and state authorities resulting from COVID-19*, was enacted by the House of Representatives and the Senate on April 2. State Representative Hannah Kane (R-Shrewsbury) said the bill provides communities with much-needed flexibility to conduct business and finalize a budget while operating under the difficult constraints imposed by the State of Emergency that took effect on March 10.

“This legislation acknowledges that in order to navigate this unprecedented crisis in the Commonwealth, our cities and towns need increased flexibility in governance. I would like to thank the public officials in Shrewsbury and Westborough for being such wonderful partners during these trying times and voicing their opinions on this legislation to me, which I was able to pass on to House leadership,” remarked Representative Kane.

In addition to giving town moderators the authority to declare a recess or continuance of town meeting for up to 30 days at a time during the State of Emergency, the bill also allows local select boards to extend town meeting business beyond the statutorily-mandated cutoff date of June 30. Communities that are unable to finalize a budget for the next fiscal year by June 30 will be allowed to continue operating using monthly interim budgets funded through free cash and other revenue accounts, with the approval of the director of local accounts at the Department of Revenue.

Representative Kane said House Bill 4598 extends the state’s personal income tax filing deadline from April 15 to July 15, reflecting changes that were recently made to the federal tax filing deadline. The bill also allows bars and restaurants holding liquor licenses to sell beer and wine to customers ordering take-out food to help local businesses recoup some of the sales that have been lost since dining in was temporarily banned last month.

House Bill 4598 also:

- authorizes cities, towns and districts that incur a deficit this year to amortize the debt over the next three fiscal years, using guidelines issued by the Commissioner of Revenue;
- extends the deadline for municipalities to exercise a right of first refusal option to purchase property until 90 days after the State of Emergency is lifted;
- removes the annual cap on hours and earnings for retired employees collecting a pension so they can work during the State of Emergency, provided they did not retire under a general or special disability law;
- permits cities and towns to extend the deadlines for property tax payments and applications for tax exemptions to a date no later than June 1;
- authorizes cities and towns to waive interest payments and other penalties for late payments of excises and taxes, including water and sewer payments, if payment is made before June 30;
- prohibits cities and towns from terminating essential services – including water, trash collection and electricity – for non-payment of taxes or fees resulting from loss of employment, serious illness or other financial hardship related to the outbreak of COVID-19;
- allows permit-granting authorities to hold meetings and public hearings remotely during the State of Emergency, using the guidelines established in the Governor's March 12 order suspending certain provisions of the Open Meeting Law;
- ensures that no permit, variance, special permit, license, amendment, extension, or other approval issued by a permit-granting authority will lapse or be deemed granted, approved or denied until 45 days after the State of Emergency is lifted, or by a date otherwise prescribed by law, whichever is later; and
- enables public corporations to conduct meetings remotely for the duration of the State of Emergency, and for 60 days thereafter.

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