

## Mass. House, Senate send \$56.2 billion budget to Governor Healey's desk

By [Samantha J. Gross](#) Globe Staff, Updated July 31, 2023, 6:36 p.m.



The State House exterior. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Less than 24 hours after negotiators inked a compromise on a \$56.2 billion annual spending plan, House and Senate lawmakers, with little debate, voted Monday to send the fiscal year 2024 package to Governor Maura Healey.

The chambers' action on the budget legislation, representing a record level of spending, came nearly a month after the July 1 deadline for the start of the new fiscal year.

The budget is now in Healey's hands for the next 10 days, and what happens next remains to be seen. Lawmakers used the governor's budget proposal as a roadmap in crafting their own, but she could seek to further shape the spending plan, the first of her term in the corner office.

State law affords Healey the ability to veto specific items or sections, or return certain provisions with amendments.

Lawmakers negotiating the state's overdue budget came to a compromise after 8 p.m. Sunday, a mere 18 hours before the House took the first vote on the major piece of legislation. They acknowledged their own tardiness in floor speeches Monday.

House budget chief Aaron Michlewitz told members before the vote that "this has been a drawn-out and complicated conference report to negotiate, to say the least. This has been a challenging budget to get over the finish line."

He quoted the band the Grateful Dead: "What a long, strange trip it's been."

Not everyone was so equanimous about the delay.

The delay “made us all nervous,” since the school nutrition staff usually starts planning for the next year at the end of the previous one, said Project Bread president and CEO Erin McAleer, who led a coalition that has advocated for free school meals since January 2021.

Still, she celebrated the final deal, which includes a provision to make universal free school meals in public schools a permanent program using state dollars. If passed, Massachusetts would become the eighth state in the nation to do so.

The program was federally funded during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“No child will ever be hungry in a Massachusetts school ever again. That is huge,” said McAleer, who noted that more than a quarter of families in the state are considered food-insecure.

The House voted, 156-2, to accept the compromise budget, with the two dissenting votes coming from Republicans, state Representatives Nicholas Boldyga of Southwick and Marc Lombardo of Billerica.

Soon after, the Senate unanimously approved the package.

The compromise [budget](#) includes top priorities of both House and Senate leaders, including tuition for students attending community college nursing programs, and a program that would make undocumented high schoolers eligible for in-state tuition rates at public colleges or universities in Massachusetts.

If signed by the governor, the proposal would also [revive an effort to make phone calls free](#) for the state’s incarcerated people and add two seats to the MBTA Board of Directors.

The spending package is notable for being the first budget to take into consideration at least \$1 billion in projected revenue from the so-called millionaires tax voters [approved last fall](#). The spending plan, if signed into law, would allocate roughly \$522 million for education and \$477 million for transportation, including \$205 million for the MBTA.

Asked Monday during her regular radio appearance on WBUR if she had a person in mind for the potential new Boston seat on the T board, Mayor Michelle Wu demurred, noting the seat remains subject to negotiations on Beacon Hill.

“I’m incredibly grateful to the House for initiating this in their budget,” Wu told the station. “The Senate for agreeing to it in the negotiations, and again, fingers crossed [the seat gets approved] in this last stretch. This is really critical.”

Those in the early-education space celebrated, noting that the legislation would provide record-high funding levels to the sector.

The compromise budget would spend \$475 million on Commonwealth Cares for Children grants, the first time the state has fully funded the grants for early education without help from the federal government. Although the spending is scaled back from the \$490 million proposed by the House, leaders in the field said the record \$1.5 billion going to the sector is something to be celebrated.

“The historic investment in early education and care in the state budget is a major step toward building a stronger, higher-quality early-childhood education system in Massachusetts,” said Lauren Kennedy, co-founder of the Boston-based early-education nonprofit Neighborhood Villages. “This funding will help

expand access to child care for families, enhance affordability, and increase educator wages across the sector.”

Roxbury Community College’s interim president, Jackie Jenkins-Scott, praised a provision that would pay for free community college by fall 2024, noting that “this budget makes the dream of attending community colleges like Roxbury Community College a reality for more Massachusetts residents.”

Some critics of the budget slammed budget writers for failing to include a tax code overhaul in the bill. The language sets aside \$581 million for a future tax code overhaul, though a concrete plan of how to spend that money has yet to emerge from negotiation.

Massachusetts Fiscal Alliance, a conservative group, said in a statement that “Speaker Mariano and Senate president Spilka ignored the last seven months of numerous calls to make Massachusetts more economically competitive.”

On the floor, the Senate minority leader, Bruce E. Tarr, said he was “disappointed to hear that there are no tax relief measures contained in the document.” He then voted to approve the budget.

The compromise budget, if signed by the governor, would:

- Set aside \$50 million for free community college across all campuses by fall 2024, including \$38 million for free community college programs for students aged 25 or older and for students pursuing degrees in nursing starting in the fall of 2023.
- Create a two-year ConnectorCare pilot program to expand eligibility, resulting in as many as 70,000 residents becoming newly eligible for more affordable health insurance coverage.
- Codify a pandemic-era renter protection law, which would slow down the court process in eviction proceedings in cases in which the tenant has applied for rental assistance.
- Spend \$6.59 billion in K-12 public education funding, an increase of \$604 million from last year. It would double the minimum aid level from \$30 to \$60 per student.

The final budget left out some notable items, too, including a House proposal to make state lottery games available online.

The bottom line of the budget is up 6.6 percent, or \$3.5 billion from the \$52.7 billion annual budget that Governor Charlie Baker signed on July 28, 2022.

“We are sending her excellency the governor her first budget, one that is balanced, thoughtful, and forward-thinking,” Michlewitz said. “As Jay-Z said, we are on to the next one.”

Senate budget chief Michael J. Rodrigues echoed his counterpart by quoting Jay-Z in his speech to senators Monday.

“I got 99 problems but this budget ain’t one,” the Fall River Democrat said.

*Travis Anderson of the Globe staff contributed to this report.*