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Representative Muratore reviews 2015-2016 legislative accomplishments

BOSTON – State Representative Mathew Muratore, R-Plymouth, recently reflected on the 2015-2016 legislative session, which saw record levels of state aid for cities and towns, the passage of a landmark opioid bill, and other significant legislative accomplishments.

Despite an unanticipated shortfall in state revenues to close out the fiscal year that ended June 30, local aid remained a top priority for Representative Muratore, who noted that Chapter 70 education aid increased by a combined \$227.3 million during the last two budget cycles, bringing the statewide total to \$4.6 billion. Over the same time period, Unrestricted General Government Aid (UGGA) – which helps communities pay for a variety of essential municipal programs – was increased by \$76.1 million, to \$1.02 billion statewide.

Throughout the current session, Representative Muratore continued to advocate for fiscal restraint and accountability to the state’s taxpayers. Neither of the last two state budgets included a draw-down from the state’s Rainy Day Fund, and both budgets saw significant reductions in the use of one-time revenues.

One of the biggest achievements of the 2015-2016 session was the passage of a landmark opioid abuse bill that focuses on treatment, education and prevention. A total of 1,294 accidental opioid overdose deaths occurred in Massachusetts in 2014 alone, representing a 41% increase over the previous year. In 2015, the number of accidental overdoses jumped to 1,531, but the Department of Public Health estimates the actual number of opioid-related deaths could increase to 1,659 once all cases pending before the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner are finalized.

To address this growing public health crisis, the new law places limits on the amount of opioids that can be prescribed; empowers patients by allowing them to refuse opioid medications or request a partial-fill prescription instead; and requires hospitals to conduct a substance abuse evaluation within the first 24 hours of

an overdose victim being brought to the emergency room. Beginning October 15, all prescribers will now be required to check a patient's prescription history every time they prescribe a Schedule II or III narcotic.

The new opioid law also requires the Drug Formulary Commission to identify and publish a list of FDA-approved non-opioid drug products that provide an effective alternative for pain management; requires medical practitioners to receive training in effective pain management and the risks of abuse and addiction associated with opioid medication before obtaining or renewing their license; and mandates that pharmaceutical companies operating in Massachusetts maintain or participate in a drug stewardship program to collect and safely dispose of unwanted drugs.

Representative Muratore also noted that many key policy initiatives he championed were signed into law during the 2015-2016 legislative session, including:

- **Pay Equity** – The state's historic pay equity law – which takes effect July 1, 2018 – prohibits wage discrimination on the basis of gender for comparable work while providing important protections to both workers and employers. A special commission will study the causes and impact of pay disparity based on race, color, religious creed, and other factors, with a report due by January 1, 2019.
- **Plymouth400**- \$400,000 in funding for the upcoming Plymouth400 commemoration was secured in the last two state budget cycles. \$200,000 in both FY16 and FY17 in order to help the Town of Plymouth leverage private donor dollars.
- **Fentanyl Trafficking** – Prior to passing the comprehensive opioid bill, the Legislature enacted a new fentanyl trafficking law calling for prison sentences of up to 20 years for manufacturing, distributing or dispensing more than 10 grams of fentanyl or any of its derivatives. Although fentanyl is 50-100 times more potent than morphine and has been linked to multiple fatal overdose deaths in Massachusetts and nationally, individuals could previously only be charged for the lesser crime of possession.
- **Municipal Modernization** – The Legislature passed comprehensive legislation to help streamline municipal operations, provide greater financial flexibility to cities and towns, and improve the delivery of essential services at the local level. Cities and towns will now have the option of creating special reserve funds to pay for unanticipated special education, out-of-school-district tuition and transportation costs. In addition to lifting the cap on investments in certificates of deposit from 1 to 3 years to help communities secure better rates on short-term investments, the bill authorizes 10-year bond anticipation notes to provide more flexibility in structuring debt; empowers the chief administrative officer to authorize deficit spending for snow and ice removal; and increases to \$50,000 the amount of surplus bond proceeds that can be applied to debt service.
- **Municipal Roads and Bridges** – In July, the Legislature approved an \$800 million bond appropriation to help cities and towns address critical infrastructure needs. Most of the borrowing authorized in the bill – \$750 million – will be allocated to new highway spending, \$615 million of which will be reimbursed by the federal government. The remaining \$50 million will fund a new Small Bridge Program to help communities repair and replace structurally-deficient bridges that don't qualify for federal funding assistance. The bill also modifies the Complete Streets Program, changing it from a certificate program to a grant program to encourage more communities to apply for funding assistance for municipal roadway improvements, including new crosswalks, enhanced street lighting, timing changes to traffic signals and the creation of designated bike lanes.

- **Public Records Reform** – The Legislature passed a sweeping public records reform measure in 2016, marking the first significant updating of the law in over 40 years. Representative Muratore sat on the 6-member conference committee that invited the press and public to be present during the deliberations and accepted testimony from various groups, which helped shape the comprehensive reform bill. Beginning January 1, 2017, municipalities and state agencies will be required to designate a Records Access Officer (RAO) to oversee all requests for public documents. The law sets time limits for state agencies and municipalities to comply with requests for public records, caps the amount of money that can be charged for these documents, and allows for the assessment of punitive damages if public records are improperly withheld. A new Public Records Assistance Fund will help municipalities comply with these changes.
- **Energy Diversity** – The recent passage of an omnibus energy bill, just months after a vote to raise the state’s solar net metering cap, will help diversify the Commonwealth’s renewable energy portfolio. This new law requires the state to enter into long-term contracts for the procurement of a combined 2,800 megawatts of offshore wind power and hydroelectric power over the next 15-20 years. The Department of Energy Resources will review these proposals to ensure that the energy generating resources are reliable, contribute to reducing winter electricity price spikes, are cost-effective for the state’s ratepayers, and take into account the potential economic and environmental benefits for ratepayers. The law also requires MassDevelopment to establish a commercial sustainable energy program so commercial property owners and manufacturers can access low-cost financing to improve their facilities and reduce their energy consumption, and includes an energy storage system mandate to help electric companies reduce greenhouse gas emissions, lower demand peak and improve reliability.
- **Federal REAL ID Compliance** – Massachusetts has been working to implement rigorous public safety standards to ensure the accuracy and integrity of its licensing system and comply with the federal REAL ID Act. Enacted in 2005 to address the threat of global terrorism, the REAL ID Act sets minimum mandatory security standards that state driver’s licenses must meet in order to be recognized as a valid identification for purposes of entering a federal building or boarding a commercial aircraft. Following the recommendations of Governor Baker, the Legislature approved language requiring individuals to provide proof of legal residence or “lawful status” in the United States to qualify for a REAL ID-compliant license, such as a valid Social Security number, and prohibiting the state from issuing licenses to individuals who are not lawfully present in the country.
- **Stolen Valor Act** – Last November, the Legislature enacted a statewide “Stolen Valor Act” to prosecute individuals who falsely claim to be a veteran or recipient of a military honor in order to obtain money, property or other tangible benefits. Individuals who falsely claim military service credentials for personal financial gain can now be charged with a gross misdemeanor, punishable by up to one year in a house of correction, a fine of \$1,000, or both.
- **Job Creation and Workforce Development** – This comprehensive economic development bill authorizes \$1.02 billion in borrowing over the next 5 years to help create and retain jobs in the Commonwealth and support critical infrastructure investments. The bill includes \$500 million for the recapitalization of the MassWorks program, which provides public infrastructure funding for city and town center revitalization, mill redevelopment, multi-family or small lot single-family residential

development, and transportation improvements that enhance roadway safety in small, rural communities. The bill includes additional funding for workforce training, small business loans and brownfields redevelopment. It also provides for a new state tax deduction on contributions to prepaid tuition and college savings programs known as 529 plans. In addition, the bill makes Massachusetts the ninth state to legalize fantasy sports contests, while also establishing a commission to study the implications for existing gaming in the Commonwealth.

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