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Representative Smola reviews 2015-2016 legislative accomplishments

BOSTON – Representative Todd M. Smola (R-Warren, Ranking Member, Committee on Ways & Means) 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 Smola, 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 Smola 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.

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. The new opioid law also 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.

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

- **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.
- **Municipal Roads and Bridges** – In July, the Legislature approved an \$800 million bond appropriation to help cities and towns address critical infrastructure needs; \$615 million of which will be reimbursed by the federal government. 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. 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.
- **Veterans HOME Act (Housing, Operations, Military Service and Enrichment)** – Enacted in July, the HOME Act provides Massachusetts veterans with expanded employment protections, enhanced housing opportunities, and additional tax abatements, including one that covers surviving spouses of service members who died from injuries sustained during active service, even if those injuries did not occur in a combat zone. The HOME Act establishes a new Office of State Veterans' Homes and Housing to advise the Secretary of Veterans' Services on matters related to veterans' housing and long-term care. In addition to giving veterans statewide preference for public housing, the bill makes veterans a protected class for hiring purposes and allows municipalities to establish special funds to assist local veterans and their spouses with their food, transportation and heating expenses, using money raised through a voluntary check-off box on municipal property and excise tax bills. In addition, the bill provides an excise tax exemption for deployed veterans and full property tax abatements for veterans with a 100% disability rating for service-connected blindness, expands eligibility for the Public Service Scholarship Program to the children and spouses of Prisoners of War who served after Vietnam, and extends Military Relief Fund assistance to National Guardsmen.

- **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.
- **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.

For additional information please contact Representative Smola at Todd.Smola@mahouse.gov or (617)722-2100.

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