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Retrenchment, progress and challenges

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As one might have expected, some 40 environmental and recreational groups have rallied to request that Massachusetts governor Baker consider hiring more personnel at the Massachusetts Departments of Environmental Protection (DEP) and Conservation and Recreation (DCR), in order to back-fill those slots left vacant by those who selected the "early retirement" program.

Each of these agencies is integral to maintaining our environment and for enabling development to proceed at more than a snail's pace. As explained in letters to the Governor, articles in The Boston Globe and several organizational newsletters, these two agencies are operating at levels between 20% and 25% below staffing levels in 2009 and 2008, respectively.

The reductions in staff have been aimed at lowering the costs of employees in these agencies, while continuing to operate at efficient levels, with the goal of reducing the overall state budget and the budget deficit. Losing about 100 additional persons each, DEP and DCR are absorbing a huge decrease in staff (30% to 35% fewer employees), losing institutional memory, and reducing the speed to process permits; not to mention the loss of years of relationships built up by municipalities and private sector engineers and attorneys.

It is conceivable that in the not too distant future, the governor will issue a "report card" on how well these agencies perform their services with reduced staffing levels. One can predict that staff may well be overwhelmed with processing permits, implementing regulations, and getting decisions out the door. Time will tell.

In the meantime, the Baker administration is calling for more hydropower as an energy source, but the Environmental Affairs Secretary has advocated against increasing net metering caps on utilities, which ultimately can harm the incentives to developing more solar energy. The legislature now has its chance to weigh in.

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