Commonwealth

Power and Politics, Money and Municipalities

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Summary

1. What we measured

Over ten budgets, FY2017 through FY2026, the state distributed $93.1 billion through its budget to the 351 cities and towns and their school districts, counting formula aid at its gross amount; about $9.0 billion, 9.6%, was federal money passed through state appropriations. Formula aid was 97% of the total. Competitive grants came to $2.52 billion. Enacted local earmarks came to $215 million to city and town governments, $699 million placed in the city or town and $811 million counting everything placed, and every earmark figure in this report names its measure.

2. Size, not need

The size of the ask matters more than the need behind it. Over ten years the Senate adopted 71% of requests under $50,000 and 6% of requests of $5 million or more. Between $1 million and $5 million, senators without a leadership post or top-tier chair won 3 of 50 need-based requests in FY2024–FY2026, against 15 of 50 for assistant leaders, whips and $30,000-tier chairs. Among need-based requests naming a town, requests for poorer resident populations were adopted less often, and requests naming the least needy towns passed 54 times in 56.

3. The denominator problem

Per resident is the wrong yardstick for infrastructure money. Per resident, the smallest fifth of towns received 4.9 times their population share of competitive awards. Measured against what each program pays for, the figure is 1.47. In core infrastructure the smallest fifth as a group received 1.29 times its share and the largest fifth 0.99; the money is concentrated in a few winners, and the median small town received 0.73.

4. Schools and Chapter 70

The school formula delivered equity and left small and regional towns behind. Chapter 70 aid per pupil rose 29% after inflation in cities and fell 1% in the 118 regional-member and non-operating towns. Over five years the state funded regional school transportation $65.5 million below the statutory 100%, a rate that is subject to appropriation. Rural school aid reached at best one-third of the $60 million a year the Special Commission on Rural Schools recommended in 2022.

5. Concentrated and diffuse

Of 16,166 money requests filed in both chambers over ten years, 12,719 were concentrated on one place, facility or organization and 3,447 were diffuse. At the same size, the Senate adopted concentrated requests somewhat more often (odds ratio 1.40), almost all of it in requests under $250,000. The larger tilt runs through size: 38% of diffuse requests were $1 million or more, against 6% of concentrated requests, and in FY2025 and FY2026 the Senate adopted none of 39 diffuse requests of $10 million or more.

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6. Why towns get what they get

Size and need explain most of the variation in earmarks and competitive grants; power adds almost nothing measurable to the prediction. Size, need, capacity and local institutions predict about 56% of the cross-town variation in ten-year earmark dollars placed in the city or town and 58% in competitive grants. Adding leadership posts, stipends, loyalty, campaign giving and connections adds less than one point out of sample. Of the associations that hold, the largest is the Senate gavel: towns represented for more of the decade by the Senate President or the Senate Ways and Means chair received 86% more earmark money per standard deviation of exposure than the model expects ($p < 0.001$).

7. Breadcrumbs

In the House, Democrats holding any paid post almost never voted the reform side: 5 of 349 member-sessions. Of House Democrats who began a session without a stipend, 62% of those who cast no reform-side vote had one by the second year, against 14% of those who voted for reform. A member's earmark money, counted by sponsor or as earmarks to the city and town governments in the district (first measure), does not predict the vote, but among House Democrats that district money is 7.2% higher per resident for each $10,000 of the member's stipend and 14% lower, about $2.5 million over nine budgets, for reform-side voters. On 42 members that would seem to indicate a link, and the data cannot show which way any influence runs. In the Senate, on this measure, the data would seem to indicate the opposite for reform-side voters: district money is higher for the 12 who cast one; on the wider measures neither holds.

8. The squeeze

Town fixed costs are a larger pile than earmarks. From FY2016 to FY2025 municipal health insurance rose $1.43 billion, 54%, against 24.9% for nine years at 2.5%. Local earmarks in the nine budgets FY2017–FY2025 equal 13% to 45% of that increase alone, depending on the measure, and an earmark is a one-year appropriation. State aid covered 22.0% of town general-fund spending in FY2025, against 25.9% in FY2006; for the median town, 11.5% against 14.1%.

9. The Fairness Index

On the Fairness Index, all state aid follows need and discretionary money follows size. The median all-aid score rises from 36 in the least needy fifth of towns to 59 in the neediest, largely through Chapter 70. On discretionary money the smallest fifth scores 91.5 at the median and the largest 36.6. Eighty-seven towns, home to 2.8 million people, stay low on both scopes under every weighting.

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10. Case studies

Counting everything placed, the largest clause placed in a single town in ten budgets is the FY2026 $31 million for the state-run Pappas Rehabilitation Hospital for Children in Canton, a policy dispute over a state facility. In the same debate the Senate passed the Pappas amendment 39 to 0 and rejected, in a bundle without a vote, a $30.4 million increase in TAFDC and EAEDC cash grants. Thirty-five towns, home to 50,388 people, had no earmark placed in them in ten budgets on the second or third measure, and 33 of them rank in the top half of the state for competitive grant dollars per resident.

11. The governor's instruments

No veto of a local earmark by Governor Healey was found in FY2025 or FY2026; her instruments have been the mid-year cut and the hold. In January 2024 her 9C cuts halved local earmarks, and in FY2026 she held all $125 million of them from July 4 to October 20, 2025, then released them in full (the administration's counts). Which earmarks survive is settled upstream, in conference, where the record does not show who decided.

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1. What we measured

Section summary

Over ten budgets, FY2017 through FY2026, the state distributed $93.1 billion through its budget to the 351 cities and towns and their school districts, counting formula aid at its gross amount; about $9.0 billion, 9.6%, was federal money passed through state appropriations. Formula aid was 97% of the total. Competitive grants came to $2.52 billion. Enacted local earmarks came to $215 million to city and town governments, $699 million placed in the city or town and $811 million counting everything placed, and every earmark figure in this report names its measure.

One city, three totals

Boston shows why this report counts local earmarks three ways. Over the ten budgets FY2017–FY2026, clauses that pay the city government came to $16.0 million: hazardous-materials teams shared with Cambridge and Everett, the fire department's training academy, the police department's youth violence strike force. That is the first measure, and per resident it ranks Boston 189th of 351.

The second measure adds $236.7 million for organizations in the city, many of them serving the whole state from a Boston headquarters. The largest is $3.3 million a year, in FY2025 and FY2026, for a juvenile court mental-health project run by Health Law Advocates. The total is $252.6 million, third in the state per resident.

The third measure adds $12.9 million in clauses that name the city but fund state facilities, such as Project Evolve at the Suffolk County jail, and $12.0 million in MassHealth rate add-ons, $3 million a budget for Franciscan Children's Hospital from FY2023 to FY2026. The total is $277.5 million, fifth per resident.

Each figure is right for what it counts. The choice of measure moves Boston's total by $261.6 million, which is why every earmark figure in this report names its measure.

Sources: General Appropriations Acts FY2017–FY2026 (malegislature.gov); Parcenomics analysis of enacted "not less than" clauses placed by town on three measures; population from U.S. Census Bureau ACS 2020–2024.

This report follows state money to the 351 cities and towns across ten enacted budgets, FY2017 through FY2026. It covers three channels.

Formula aid is money the state distributes by rule: Chapter 70 school aid, unrestricted local aid, Chapter 90 road money and the other cherry-sheet programs. It is most of the money and the least discretionary.

Competitive grants are awarded by executive agencies on application: MassWorks, Complete Streets, culvert and dam repair, climate resilience, library construction and others.

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Earmarks are the “not less than” clauses the Legislature writes into the budget, directing a sum to a named place or organization. Local earmarks are counted on three measures, set out below.

Every dollar carries its stage. A request is filed as a budget amendment, adopted or rejected by each chamber, kept or dropped in conference, signed or vetoed by the governor, sometimes restored by override, and finally paid or not. A vetoed earmark that is not overridden counts as zero. Earmark figures in this report are enacted budget text unless stated otherwise; matching each earmark to a payment is not yet done.

The evidence base:

- 23,830 budget amendments filed in both chambers, FY2017–FY2026, with sponsor and disposition, from the malegislature.gov amendment records. Of these, 16,166 ask for a dollar amount, excluding the Ways and Means corrective and technical amendments.
- 10,040 enacted earmark clauses, parsed from the ten General Appropriations Acts and placed in a town where the text or the recipient’s address allows.
- Every grant and aid payment in the Comptroller’s CTHRU spending data, classed formula, competitive, earmark, shared revenue, state-entity transfer, pass-through or unknown, and placed by town. CTHRU records cherry-sheet aid net of assessments, so Chapter 70 and the other cherry-sheet programs are counted at their gross DESE and Division of Local Services amounts.
- 13,339 competitive award records; the 10,740 counted for FY2017–FY2026 total $2.73 billion.
- Burden measures for every town: road miles, town-owned bridges, culverts, dams, coastline, floodplain, pupils, jobs and housing.
- 152 recorded roll calls on the Legislature’s own rules, pay and transparency, with 15,683 member votes, matched to stipends from the state payroll.
- Need indicators for every town: poverty, median household income, property wealth per resident and Chapter 70 share.

Two conventions matter throughout. A fiscal year is credited to the General Court that enacted its budget, on that court’s district lines. And “leadership” money that arrives through Ways and Means base text or conference is reported as its own stratum; it is never assigned to a local member who did not file for it.

Ten years of state money

Over ten budgets, FY2017 through FY2026, the state distributed $93.1 billion through its budget to the 351 cities and towns and their school districts, counting formula aid at its gross amount. That figure is state and federal aid together: about $9.0 billion, 9.6%, was federal money passed through state appropriations. Formula aid was 97% of the total. Competitive grants came to $2.52 billion and enacted local earmarks to city and town governments to $0.21 billion, together about 3%; earmarks are counted as enacted, not as paid. The findings concern how formula aid, competitive grants and earmarks reach the towns. Counted more

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widely, local earmarks come to $0.70 billion or $0.81 billion; the three measures are set out below.

Three ways to count a local earmark

A local earmark is a “not less than” clause in the enacted budget that sends money to a particular place. This study looks at fairness by place, and there are three ways to decide which clauses belong to a town. They give different totals, so this report uses all three and names the measure with every earmark figure.

- To the city or town government: $215 million over ten years, FY2017–FY2026. Clauses that pay the city or town government, one of its departments or schools, or a municipal project with no other recipient. Money paid to the city or town for an organization’s program counts here, because it passes through the municipal budget; money for an organization counts on the second measure, even when the organization carries the town’s name. This is the money that reaches the municipal budget, which is why the Fairness Index uses it.
- Placed in the city or town: $699 million. Adds $485 million for organizations, whether the clause names the place or the organization’s address places it.
- Everything placed: $811 million. Adds $112 million for state facilities and state agency programs located in the city or town and MassHealth rate add-ons for providers there, $51 million of it in clauses that name the city or town. The largest is the $31 million FY2026 clause for the Pappas Rehabilitation Hospital for Children in Canton.

Each measure contains the one before it, so no town counts more on the first than on the second, or more on the second than on the third. All three are small beside the $5.44 billion of “not less than” clauses in the ten budgets. Most of that sets floors for statewide programs.

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2. Size, not need

Section summary

The size of the ask matters more than the need behind it. Over ten years the Senate adopted 71% of requests under $50,000 and 6% of requests of $5 million or more. Between $1 million and $5 million, senators without a leadership post or top-tier chair won 3 of 50 need-based requests in FY2024–FY2026, against 15 of 50 for assistant leaders, whips and $30,000-tier chairs. Among need-based requests naming a town, requests for poorer resident populations were adopted less often, and requests naming the least needy towns passed 54 times in 56.

Two plans for hungry students

In May 2023 the Senate took up two amendments to the FY2024 budget with the same purpose: grants from the Department of Higher Education, awarded by request for proposals on demonstrated need, to fight food insecurity among students at public campuses.

Amendment 595, filed by Sen. Michael Moore of the Second Worcester district, who held neither a leadership post nor a top-tier chair, asked for $2 million for a hunger pilot at the state universities. Nine senators joined him. It was rejected in a bundle, without a recorded vote.

Amendment 663, filed by Assistant Majority Leader Joan Lovely of the Second Essex district, asked for $1 million for a hunger-free campus initiative at two- and four-year public colleges. It was redrafted, carried 17 cosponsors and passed on a roll call, 39 to 0. Eight senators signed both.

The adopted request was half the size, and section 2 shows that size alone lowers the odds. One pair is an anecdote. It is consistent with the count across the band: between $1 million and $5 million, senators without a leadership post or top-tier chair won 3 of 50 need-based requests in FY2024–FY2026, and assistant leaders, whips and $30,000-tier chairs won 15 of 50.

Sources: Senate Amendments 595 and 663 to S.3, FY2024, text, movers and disposition, and Senate roll call 34 of 2023 (malegislature.gov); Parcenomics analysis of 1,092 Senate need-based amendments, FY2024–FY2026, with posts from malegislature.gov member records and CTHRU payroll (cthru.data.socrata.com).

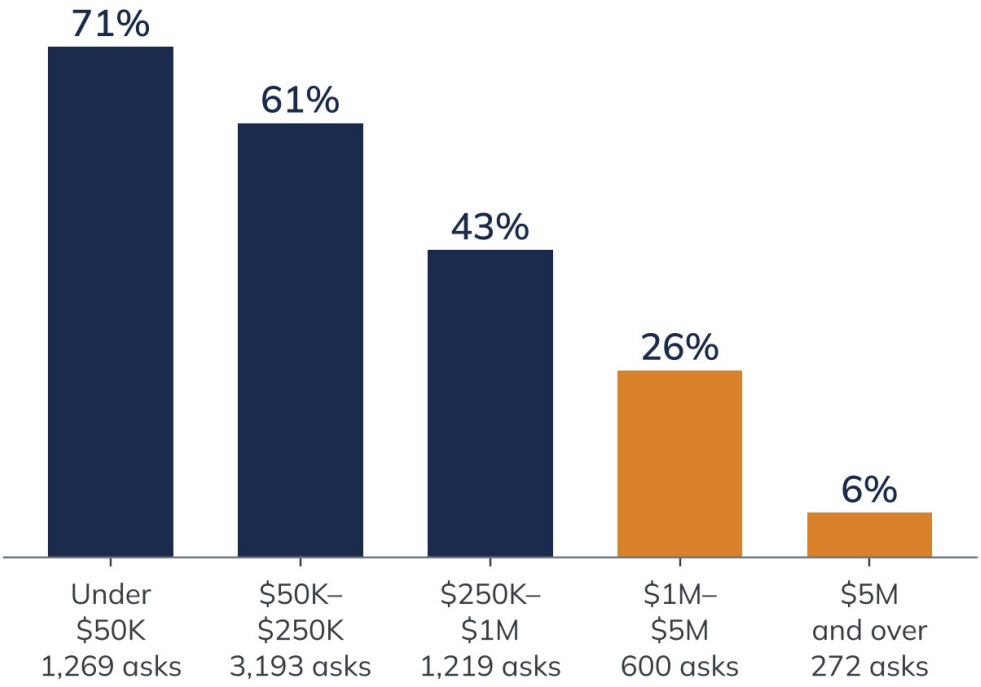
The clearest pattern in the amendment data is the size of the ask.

Over ten years 6,553 Senate budget amendments asked for money. The Senate adopted 71% of the requests under $50,000 and 61% of those between $50,000 and $250,000. Between $1 million and $5 million the rate fell to 26%. Of 272 requests for $5 million or more, it adopted 6%. Holding the year and the kind of request constant, each tenfold increase in the amount went with odds of adoption about a third as high. Sponsors withdrew about 775 of these requests before a decision; they count here as not adopted. Most of the rest were decided in bundles without a recorded vote. Leaving the withdrawn requests out raises every rate but keeps the order; under $50,000 the rate becomes 77%.

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The bigger the ask, the less often the Senate adopts it

Share of Senate budget amendments adopted, by dollars requested, FY2017–FY2026



Source: Parcenomics analysis of FY2017–FY2026 Senate budget amendments and debate records (malegislature.gov); 6,553 money requests by size band, concentrated and diffuse requests together.

The Legislature has a fair defense. Large requests deserve more scrutiny, revenue is finite, and approving many small one-time items while deferring structural changes to the base budget is a defensible way to manage a $60 billion budget. The consequence is still a consequence: needs that come in large units, such as a statewide benefit increase, rarely survive the floor.

Where the post matters

The Senate's need-based amendments of FY2024–FY2026 can be tested in more detail. There are 1,092 of them, covering food, housing, health, poverty and similar purposes, each scored for the need of the towns it names and matched to the sponsor's post in the General Court that enacted the budget.

Below $250,000 the sponsor's post makes less difference. Senators without a leadership post or a top-tier chair won 85% of requests under $50,000 and 73% of those between $50,000 and $250,000.

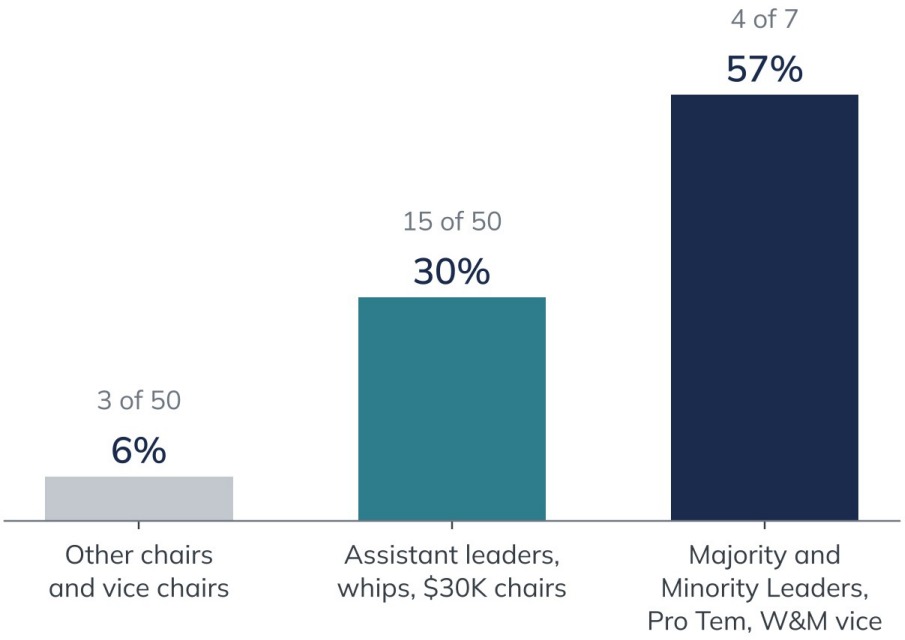
Between $1 million and $5 million it is different. Senators without a leadership post or top-tier chair won 3 of 50 such requests, 6%. Assistant leaders, whips and $30,000-tier chairs won 15 of 50, 30%. The top group's seven requests came from two senators: Majority Leader Cynthia Stone Creem, who won 4 of her 6, and Minority Leader Bruce Tarr, who lost his one. Nineteen

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of the 22 winning requests in that band came from senators in the top two groups. The top group is small: seven requests would seem to indicate an advantage at the top, not establish one. Posts for FY2024 and FY2025 are taken from the General Court that enacted those budgets, and a senator counts as a $30,000-tier chair only when one chair pays at that tier; an earlier version that used the FY2026 roster for some of them gave 5%, 27% and 56%.

Between $1 million and $5 million, senators with posts won more often

Senate need-based requests of $1M–$5M adopted, by sponsor's post, FY2024–FY2026



Source: Parcenomics analysis of 1,092 Senate need-based budget amendments, FY2024–FY2026 (malegislature.gov), requests of $1,000,000–$4,999,999; posts as held in the General Court that enacted each budget (FY2024–25 the 2023–2024 court, FY2026 the 2025–2026 court), from malegislature.gov member records and CTHRU payroll stipends (cthru.data.socrata.com).

Need does not predict adoption

The need score of the towns a request names has no measurable effect on whether it passes (odds ratio 0.96 per point on a ten-point scale, $p = 0.39$). Split need into its two parts and the picture sharpens. Holding the size of the request constant, a town whose residents have lower incomes and more poverty is less likely to have its request adopted (odds ratio 0.73 per point, $p < 0.001$). A town with a weaker tax base is more likely (1.19 per point, $p < 0.001$). The two parts pull in opposite directions, which is why the combined need score shows nothing.

Requests naming towns in the lowest need bracket, a group that includes Newton, Brookline, Wellesley, Nantucket, Weston and Cohasset, passed 54 times in 56. Requests naming a town at all passed 78% of the time (315 of 404); requests for statewide or regional purposes, 35% (239 of 688).

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The town-named losses are concentrated in Boston. Of the nine senators whose town-named requests failed most often, five represent districts that include Boston neighborhoods. Sen. Lydia Edwards of the Third Suffolk district, whose requests failed most often, won 11 of 27. Sen. Pavel Payano of the First Essex district, which includes Lawrence, won 16 of 16. Boston senators file many requests for the same city, and those requests compete with one another for a limited allowance.

A caution applies. The need-based amendments were also scored for merit, but 56% of those scores rest on a 300-character excerpt rather than the full text. The merit result is provisional and is not used here. The need and size results do not depend on it.

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3. The denominator problem

Section summary

Per resident is the wrong yardstick for infrastructure money. Per resident, the smallest fifth of towns received 4.9 times their population share of competitive awards. Measured against what each program pays for, the figure is 1.47. In core infrastructure the smallest fifth as a group received 1.29 times its share and the largest fifth 0.99; the money is concentrated in a few winners, and the median small town received 0.73.

The $2 million bridge

Maple Street crosses the East Branch of the Housatonic River in Hinsdale, a Berkshire County town of 1,859 people. The town owns the bridge. It was built in 1948, its deck is rated 2, critical, on the federal scale from 0 to 9, and the 2025 National Bridge Inventory lists it as closed to traffic. At its last count, in 2018, it carried 2,457 vehicles a day.

Valued the way this report values every bridge, deck area times the federal replacement cost per square foot, it would cost $2.07 million to replace. The inventory's own estimate of the improvement cost is higher, $5.4 million. At the lower figure that is $1,113 for every resident of Hinsdale, for one bridge. Counting every structure the town owns, Hinsdale carries $10.2 million of bridge replacement cost, $5,490 per resident, and $4.76 million of it is in poor condition.

Across the smallest fifth of towns, town-owned bridges come to $7,455 of replacement cost per resident; across the largest fifth, $583. A grant to replace Maple Street's bridge would look large per resident. It would be the size of the bridge.

Sources: FHWA National Bridge Inventory 2025 (fhwa.dot.gov); MassDOT bridge inventory (gis.massdot.state.ma.us); FHWA Bridge Replacement Unit Costs 2025; U.S. Census Bureau ACS 2020–2024; Parcenomics analysis.

Mount Washington keeps up 17.4 miles of town road for 193 residents. Boston keeps up 792 miles for 666,442. That is about 90 miles of road per 1,000 residents in Mount Washington and 1.2 in Boston.

Divide competitive grant money by residents and Mount Washington looks like a winner: $4,402 per resident over ten years, seventh in the state. Boston received $220. That comparison measures population. It does not measure what the grants pay for.

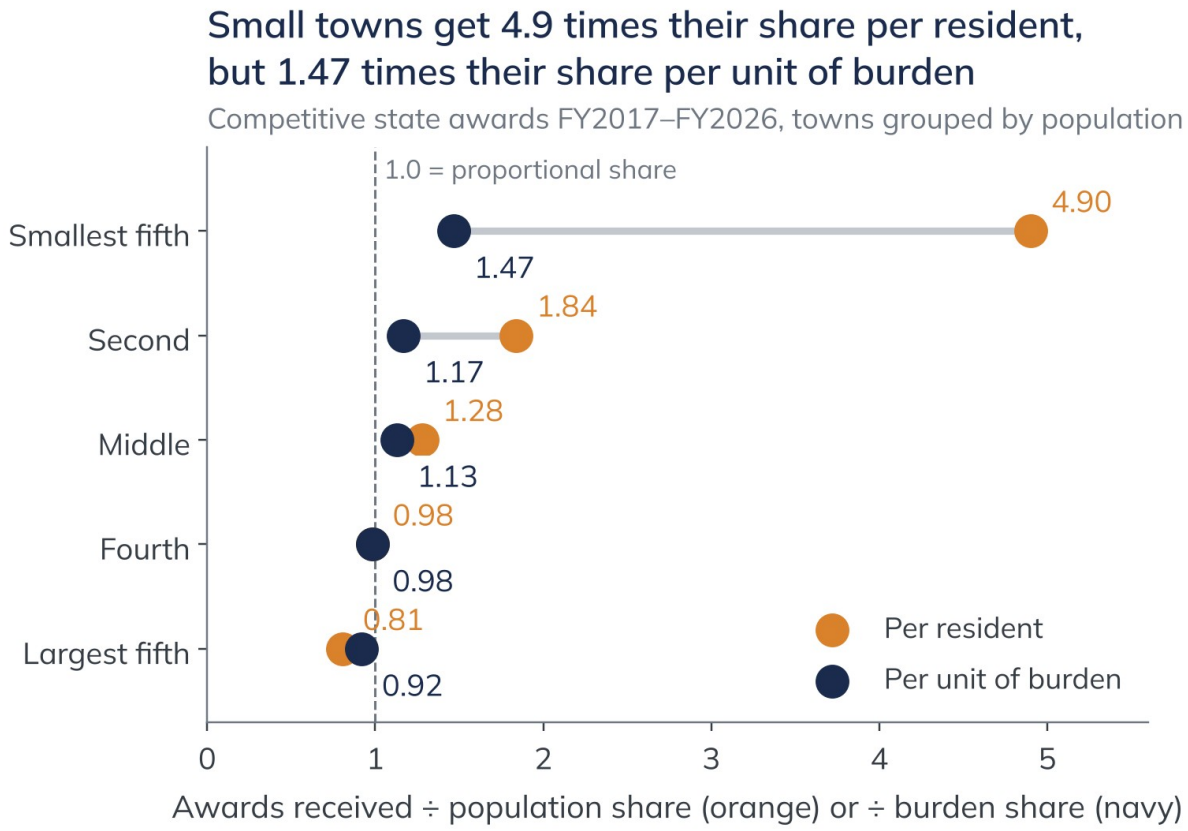
A mile of road, a bridge or a culvert costs about the same to rebuild whether 20 people use it or 2,000. The smallest fifth of towns, 71 towns with 90,673 residents, maintain 2,942 miles of local road: 32 miles per 1,000 residents, against 2.6 in the largest fifth. They own $7,455 of town bridge replacement cost per resident; the largest fifth own $583. Bridges here are scored, not counted: each of 3,771 town-owned structures is valued at its deck area times the federal replacement cost per square foot, for $5.42 billion in all, $603 million of it in poor condition. State and federal bridges are excluded.

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Counting the right thing

Each program in the award catalog pays for something specific. We matched each to its own measure: road miles for Complete Streets, road-stream crossings for culvert grants, town-owned high- and significant-hazard dams for dam repair, shoreline for seawall grants, acres of floodplain for resilience grants, jobs for MassWorks, residents for libraries. Then we asked what each town would have received if every program had divided its money in proportion to its own measure. A town that received exactly that scores 1.0.

On that basis the smallest fifth of towns scores 1.47 and the largest 0.92. Small towns still come out ahead, but the gap shrinks from about six to one per resident to about 1.6 to 1. The correlation between award dollars and population falls from –0.54 per resident to –0.14 on the burden index. Most of the size effect is a denominator effect.



Source: Parcenomics analysis of state competitive award lists, FY2017–FY2026 (agency award lists and press releases, mass.gov), towns grouped by population fifth; MassDOT road and bridge inventories (gis.massdot.state.ma.us); FHWA National Bridge Inventory 2025 (fhwa.dot.gov); U.S. Census Bureau ACS 2020–2024.

In the core infrastructure programs alone, roads and streets, culverts, dams, seawalls, flood resilience and energy, the typical small town receives less than its share. The median small town scores 0.73; the median large city, 0.92. As groups, the smallest fifth received 1.29 times its core-infrastructure share and the largest fifth 0.99: a few small towns that won large grants pull the small-town total above 1.

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The link to need gets stronger, not weaker. Per resident, award dollars track income need weakly (rank correlation 0.25) and tax-base need not at all (0.04). On the burden index both are positive: 0.29 and 0.18.

The rankings move. Dense cities and inner suburbs rise because they carry jobs, pupils and cost-burdened households: Revere from 133rd to 22nd, Everett from 148th to 34th. Hill towns fall: Middlefield from 115th to 334th, Tyringham from 139th to 328th. Mount Washington falls from 7th to 155th.

The per-resident figure is not wrong. It answers a different question, and a Boston taxpayer is entitled to ask it. Some programs are capped per community by design, which helps small towns on purpose. A town that keeps a road few people drive makes a choice the state need not underwrite at the same rate as an arterial. Those points argue for publishing both figures.

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4. Schools and Chapter 70

Section summary

The school formula delivered equity and left small and regional towns behind. Chapter 70 aid per pupil rose 29% after inflation in cities and fell 1% in the 118 regional-member and non-operating towns. Over five years the state funded regional school transportation $65.5 million below the statutory 100%, a rate that is subject to appropriation. Rural school aid reached at best one-third of the $60 million a year the Special Commission on Rural Schools recommended in 2022.

Two districts, ten years

Mohawk Trail Regional serves eight hill towns: Ashfield, Buckland, Charlemont, Colrain, Hawley, Heath, Plainfield and Shelburne. Its foundation enrollment fell from 948 pupils in FY2017 to 750 in FY2026, 21% fewer. Chapter 70 aid rose from $5.97 million to $6.37 million. After inflation, aid per pupil was flat: $8,507 in FY2017 and $8,496 in FY2026, in FY2026 dollars. The district received minimum aid in nine of the ten years, increases of $30 to $150 per pupil.

Springfield's enrollment fell 2.5%, from 29,109 to 28,380. Its aid rose from $319.9 million to $545.8 million, and aid per pupil rose 29.6% after inflation, from $14,836 to $19,233. In FY2026 Chapter 70 aid covered 91% of Springfield's foundation budget and 53% of Mohawk Trail's, which had been 60% in FY2017.

Both results are the formula as written. The Student Opportunity Act sends new money to districts with more low-income students, and Springfield has many of them. Mohawk Trail lost a fifth of its pupils, and the formula counts pupils.

Sources: DESE Chapter 70 district data, FY2017–FY2026, and regional district membership (doe.mass.edu); CPI-U fiscal-year averages (BLS, via FRED); Parcenomics analysis in FY2026 dollars.

Massachusetts cities and towns put $8.38 billion of local money into their schools in FY2026 because the state said they must. That is the required local contribution under Chapter 70, the largest single obligation on most municipal budgets. The state's side, Chapter 70 aid, is $7.36 billion.

Over ten years the state's share grew faster. After inflation, aid rose 18% from FY2017 to FY2026, required local contributions rose 5%, and enrollment fell 4%.

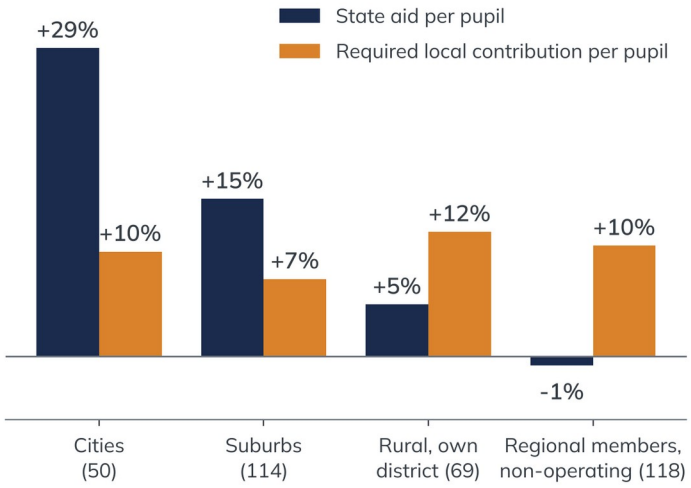
The Student Opportunity Act of 2019 steered that growth to need, as it was written to do. Of the increase in Chapter 70 aid from FY2020 to FY2026, 78% went to the fifth of districts with the highest share of low-income students. That is a delivered reform.

The other side of a formula that steers new money to need is that most districts sit at the floor. In FY2026, 244 of 374 districts received minimum aid. By town type the decade looks like this:

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State school aid per pupil grew 29% in cities and fell 1% in regional-member towns

Change FY2017–FY2026 after inflation, Chapter 70



Source: Parcenomics analysis of DESE Chapter 70 data, FY2017–FY2026 (doe.mass.edu), by town type. FY2026 dollars, CPI-U fiscal-year average.

The 118 regional-member and non-operating towns received $48.9 million less inflation-adjusted aid in FY2026 than in FY2017, while their required contribution rose $14.5 million. Some of this is the design working: these towns have fewer low-income students and fast-falling enrollment. But a district that loses a fifth of its pupils still runs the same buildings and bus routes.

Who pays

Required contributions take a median 2.6% of household income statewide. No community is asked for more than 82.5% of its foundation budget, and 193 of 351 towns sit at that cap. For most of them the formula would ask more if it could.

The common complaint in resort towns is that the property half of the formula charges them for second homes whose owners send no children to the schools. The data support that for a handful of towns, not as a rule. In the 31 towns where more than 30% of housing is seasonal, 30 are at the cap, and in most of them residents' income alone would put them there. The cap, not the property weight, sets their share. Their median required contribution is 2.0% of household income, below the statewide median.

Earmarks, counting everything placed, and competitive grants were tested against school burden, and they show no consistent pattern. Discretionary money neither compensates for school burden nor punishes it.

The cost of being small

The foundation budget assumes the same cost per pupil for a district of 150 as for one of 15,000. Operating districts with fewer than 300 pupils spent 1.93 times their foundation

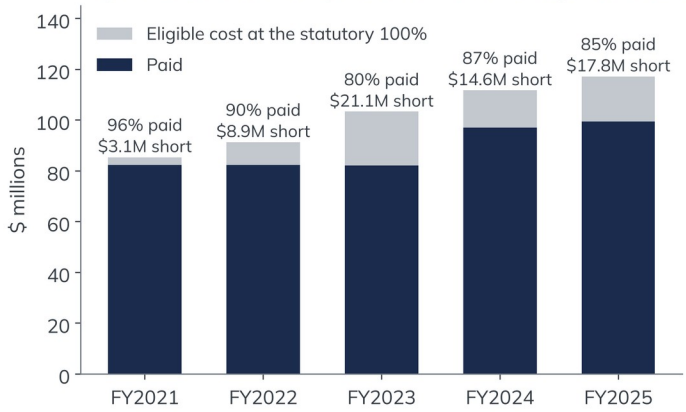
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budget in FY2025. Districts of 10,000 or more spent 1.15 times. The local taxpayer covers the difference.

The state has two programs aimed at that gap, and neither is funded at the level set in statute or recommended. State law sets reimbursement for regional districts at 100% of eligible transportation costs, subject to appropriation. From FY2021 through FY2025 the state paid between 80% and 96%, $65.5 million below the statutory 100%.

The state paid 80% to 96% of regional school transportation, $65.5 million below 100%

Regional school district transportation reimbursement against the statutory 100%, FY2021–FY2025



Source: DESE Transportation Reimbursements FY2021–FY2025 (doe.mass.edu); Parcenomics analysis. The FY2023 DESE file prints 41 district labels one row out of line; it was realigned and the totals are unaffected.

The Special Commission on Rural Schools recommended $60 million a year in rural school aid in 2022. The state distributed $4 million in FY2022, $16 million in FY2026 and $20 million in FY2027. The best year reached one-third of the recommendation.

In Berkshire County, foundation enrollment fell 9.9% over the decade, against 3.7% statewide. Pittsfield’s aid rose 26% after inflation. The other 31 towns received 7.1% less.

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5. Concentrated and diffuse

Section summary

Of 16,166 money requests filed in both chambers over ten years, 12,719 were concentrated on one place, facility or organization and 3,447 were diffuse. At the same size, the Senate adopted concentrated requests somewhat more often (odds ratio 1.40), almost all of it in requests under $250,000. The larger tilt runs through size: 38% of diffuse requests were $1 million or more, against 6% of concentrated requests, and in FY2025 and FY2026 the Senate adopted none of 39 diffuse requests of $10 million or more.

A majority on the amendment

In May 2024, 24 of the 40 senators signed Amendment 578 to the FY2025 budget, filed by Assistant Majority Leader Sal DiDomenico. It asked for $29 million to start a 10% increase in TAFDC and EAEDC cash grants in October 2024 instead of April 2025. It was rejected in a bundle, without a recorded vote.

A year later Sen. DiDomenico filed Amendment 522 to the FY2026 budget: $30.4 million, $20.2 million for TAFDC and $10.2 million for EAEDC, for a further 10% from January 2026. Twenty senators signed it, half the chamber. It was rejected the same way.

In the same debate the Senate passed Amendment 543, filed by Sen. Dylan Fernandes, on a roll call, 39 to 0: $35.8 million for two state facilities, $31 million for the Pappas Rehabilitation Hospital for Children and $4.8 million for the Pocasset Mental Health Center. It adopted 392 other concentrated requests totaling $46.1 million, with a median of $50,000. It received 19 diffuse requests of $10 million or more and adopted none.

The grant increases were permanent costs; Amendment 543 kept two existing facilities open. The pattern is the one this section measures: diffuse needs arrive in sizes the budget process rarely approves.

Sources: Senate Amendment 578 to S.4, FY2025, and Amendments 522 and 543 to S.3, FY2026, text, movers and disposition, and Senate roll call 29 of 2025 (malegislature.gov); Parcenomics analysis of FY2026 Senate amendments by size and kind.

A concentrated request benefits one place, facility or organization. A diffuse request benefits everyone who qualifies, statewide. Of 16,166 money requests filed in both chambers over ten years, 12,719 were concentrated and 3,447 diffuse.

At the same size, the Senate adopted concentrated requests somewhat more often: an odds ratio of 1.40, about seven percentage points. Almost all of that edge is in small requests: 27 points under $50,000 and 20 points between $50,000 and $250,000. Above $250,000 there is no difference. By the final enacted budget, earmark requests of the two kinds written the same way fared alike. The effect also loses significance if statewide organizations are counted as diffuse.

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The larger tilt runs through size. Diffuse benefits are spread across everyone, so they come in large numbers. The median diffuse request in the Senate was $500,000; the median concentrated request, $80,000. Thirty-eight percent of diffuse requests were $1 million or more, against 6% of concentrated requests. In FY2025 and FY2026 the Senate adopted none of 39 diffuse requests of $10 million or more. No single vote has to favor a place over a program for the totals to come out that way.

Within the FY2024–FY2026 need-based amendments the gap is widest. The Senate adopted concentrated need-based requests about half the time and diffuse ones 10% to 14% of the time, a gap that holds at equal size (odds ratio 3.7). The food pantry passes; the benefit increase waits.

The executive branch runs the other way. In both recorded mid-year cuts, governors cut a larger share of concentrated line dollars than program dollars: 2.2% against 0.25% in December 2016, and 1.3% against 0.34% in January 2024 (0.86% counting the MassHealth fee-for-service cut). The Legislature restores concentrated lines more reliably after vetoes, though most of that gap comes from cuts to sheriffs, prosecutors and agency administration that it chose to let stand.

The fair conclusion is modest. Places do have an edge at equal size, but it is small, and it lives in small requests. The structural result is that diffuse needs arrive in sizes the budget process rarely approves.

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6. Why towns get what they get

Section summary

Size and need explain most of the variation in earmarks and competitive grants; power adds almost nothing measurable to the prediction. Size, need, capacity and local institutions predict about 56% of the cross-town variation in ten-year earmark dollars placed in the city or town and 58% in competitive grants. Adding leadership posts, stipends, loyalty, campaign giving and connections adds less than one point out of sample. Of the associations that hold, the largest is the Senate gavel: towns represented for more of the decade by the Senate President or the Senate Ways and Means chair received 86% more earmark money per standard deviation of exposure than the model expects ($p < 0.001$).

When the gavel moves

Sen. Michael Rodrigues of Westport became chair of Senate Ways and Means in February 2019. In the three budgets before, FY2017–FY2019, his First Bristol and Plymouth district received $255,000 a year in earmarks to its city and town governments. In the seven enacted while he held the chair, FY2020–FY2026, it received $678,571 a year, 2.66 times as much. Statewide, earmarks to city and town governments rose 1.73 times between the same periods. On the second measure, which adds organizations placed in the district, its money grew 2.21 times and the state's 2.21.

The presidency left Stanley Rosenberg's Hampshire, Franklin and Worcester district after the FY2018 budget. In his two budgets as President it received $205,000 a year in earmarks to its town governments; in the eight that followed, $349,000 a year, 70% more, while the statewide figure rose 1.97 times.

The money is counted where it lands, whoever asked for it, on each budget's district lines. Two districts are anecdotes, and they point in the direction of the test across all 351 towns, where gavel exposure goes with 86% more earmark money per standard deviation than the model expects.

Sources: General Appropriations Acts FY2017–FY2026 (malegislature.gov); Parcenomics analysis of earmarks by Senate district, each budget on the lines of the General Court that enacted it; Senate leadership from malegislature.gov.

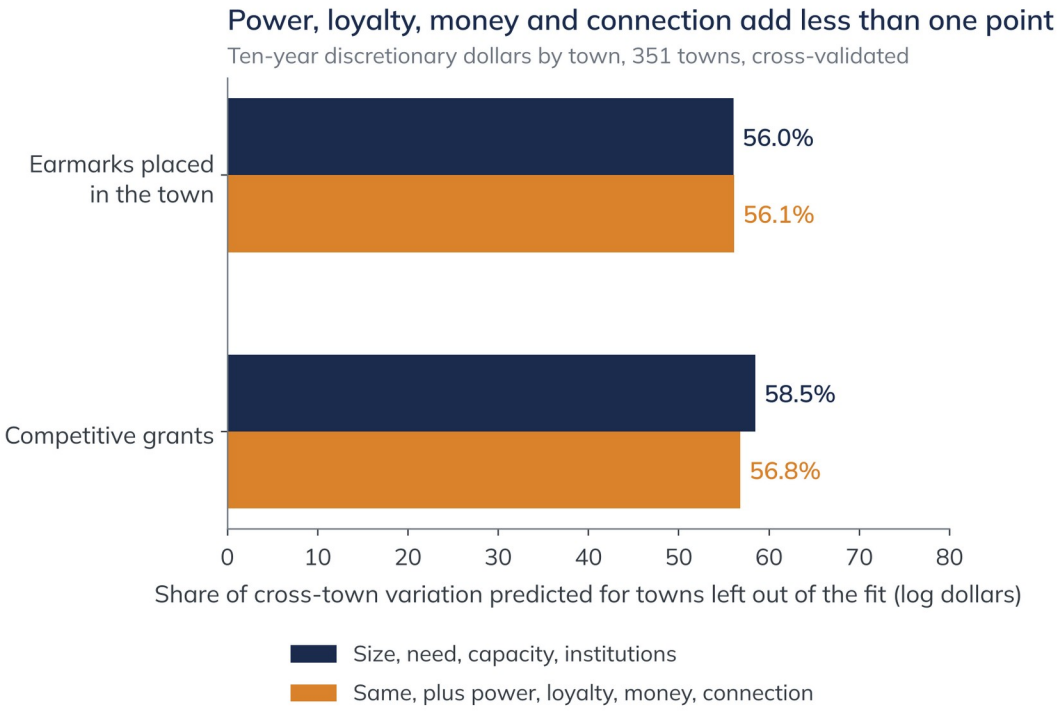
The question for each town is how much of what it received can be explained by things that ought to matter, and how much by things that ought not to. The test covers the two discretionary channels, earmarks placed in the city or town and competitive grants, which are about 3% of the money; formula aid is set by statute and is used here as a control.

The model starts with rational factors: population, road miles, employment, income, poverty, property wealth, Chapter 70 share, a capacity proxy, the presence of a hospital or college, the number of nonprofits, county-seat and Gateway City status, and formula aid. Tested on towns left out of each fit (out of sample), these factors predict about 56% of the variation across towns in ten-year earmark dollars and 58% in competitive grants. Within the fit (in sample),

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size alone accounts for 53% of the earmark variation; need adds about four points and capacity two.

Then the model adds what should not matter: leadership posts held by the town's representative and senator, stipend levels, seniority and party, documented breaks with leadership, residents' giving to leadership committees, and ties between recipients and officials. Together they add less than one point to the prediction for towns left out of the fit. In a side-by-side run, the earmark figure moves from 56.0% to 56.1%; for competitive grants it falls, from 58.5% to 56.8%.



Source: Parcenomics analysis of CTHRU statewide spending (cthru.data.socrata.com), General Appropriations Acts FY2017–FY2026 (malegislature.gov), DLS Municipal Databank (dls-gw.dor.state.ma.us), U.S. Census Bureau ACS 2020–2024 and OCPF campaign finance reports (ocpf.us); cross-validated R^2, log ten-year dollars, all 351 towns. Earmarks are placed in the city or town (second measure).

Formula aid per resident, counted gross, is one of the controls. Holding size and need constant, towns with more of it also received more in earmarks (34% per standard deviation, $p = 0.013$) and competitive grants (28%, $p < 0.001$), so discretionary money does not offset formula aid.

Most of the remaining 44% is project-by-project variation that no town-level factor reaches.

The power signals that hold

A few associations survived the checks we ran: the data corrections of October 18 and 19, the rerun with gross formula aid, county controls, and dropping Boston or the three metropolitan counties. They come from 516 cross-town tests, so a single result near $p = 0.03$ deserves caution. They are associations, not causes.

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- Senate gavel. Towns represented for more of the decade by the Senate President (Stanley Rosenberg to December 2017, Harriette Chandler as acting President and then President to July 2018, Karen Spilka since) or the Senate Ways and Means chair (Spilka to February 2019, Michael Rodrigues since) received more earmark money than the model expects for towns of their size and need: 86% more per standard deviation of exposure, about 1.6 of the ten budgets ($p < 0.001$), with each budget credited to the President and chair who held the posts when it was enacted. As a yes-or-no measure (45 towns ever represented), it is 44% per standard deviation ($p = 0.03$). In raw earmark dollars per resident the holders' districts rank 7th to 30th of 54 Senate districts counting everything placed (6th to 33rd on the second measure, which the model uses). The result holds with county controls, without Boston or the three metropolitan counties, and without any one holder's district (79% to 95%, $p < 0.001$); crediting the 2017–2018 presidency by General Court rather than by budget gives 90%. Within a town, the data would seem to indicate that gaining the gavel also coincides with more earmark money ($p = 0.01$, 40 towns with a change); before the presidency coding was corrected, that within-town result was not significant ($p = 0.06$). The data would seem to indicate that gavel exposure also goes with larger individual items, 11% per standard deviation ($p = 0.016$). When money traced to the Ways and Means chairs' corrective amendments is taken out of the outcome, that per-item result is smaller and still holds ($p = 0.04$); the gavel result among towns with any earmark ($p = 0.03$) and the all-town result (+72%, $p = 0.001$) hold.
- Senate assistant leaders and whips. The data would seem to indicate that towns represented by senators in these posts received more: 89% per standard deviation ($p = 0.026$), holding with county controls and without Boston. These posts would also seem to go with larger items, 16% per standard deviation ($p = 0.008$). No House post is associated with larger items.
- House Republicans. Among towns that received any earmark, Republican House representation is associated with 15% less per standard deviation ($p = 0.003$).
- Breaking with leadership. Within a town, a House member's documented break with leadership coincides with about 93% less in later budgets ($p = 0.002$, 49 towns). The list of breaks is short and hand-coded.
- Senate stipend and seniority, within a town. A rise in the senator's stipend coincides with more earmark money ($p = 0.013$); this captures movement into posts. More seniority coincides with slightly less ($p = 0.014$).

Competitive grants show no power signal in the main specification: no leadership, stipend or seniority measure is significant across or within towns. Per-resident and per-mile versions show a few scattered results in both directions. Residents' campaign giving to leadership committees shows no association with either channel.

Two cautions. House leadership exposure cannot be separated from geography: 87% of the population represented by a House gavel holder lives in Suffolk, Middlesex or Norfolk counties, and 37% in Boston. Those holders were Speakers Robert DeLeo (to December 2020) and Ronald Mariano, and Ways and Means chairs Brian Dempsey (to July 2017), Jeffrey Sánchez (July 2017 through the 2017–2018 session) and Aaron Michlewitz (since 2019). And the largest

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items mostly have no filed amendment behind them. Only 24 of the 61 clauses of $950,000 or more placed in a town (second measure) match a member's amendment. They originate in Ways and Means text or in conference, where the public record does not say who asked.

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7. Breadcrumbs

Section summary

In the House, Democrats holding any paid post almost never voted the reform side: 5 of 349 member-sessions. Of House Democrats who began a session without a stipend, 62% of those who cast no reform-side vote had one by the second year, against 14% of those who voted for reform. A member's earmark money, counted by sponsor or as earmarks to the city and town governments in the district (first measure), does not predict the vote, but among House Democrats that district money is 7.2% higher per resident for each $10,000 of the member's stipend and 14% lower, about $2.5 million over nine budgets, for reform-side voters. On 42 members that would seem to indicate a link, and the data cannot show which way any influence runs. In the Senate, on this measure, the data would seem to indicate the opposite for reform-side voters: district money is higher for the 12 who cast one; on the wider measures neither holds.

The vote on the Speaker's term

On July 7, 2021, the House voted on an amendment to its rules, filed by Rep. Tami Gouveia of the 14th Middlesex district, to limit the Speaker's term. It failed, 35 to 125. Of 30 Republicans, 29 voted for it. Of 129 Democrats, six did: five who held no paid post and one who drew a stipend of $5,908. Of the 93 Democrats who drew a stipend that year, 92 voted no.

In that session's two budgets, FY2022 and FY2023, the six yes voters' districts received $2.04 per resident a year in earmarks to their city and town governments, against $4.06 for the 123 Democrats who voted no. Four of the six came back for the next session. In its budgets, FY2024 and FY2025, their districts received $1.85 per resident a year, $0.7 million in all, against $4.50 for the 105 no voters who came back, $41.5 million in all.

Six members are anecdotes, and a roll call does not record why anyone voted as they did. Across the 42 House Democrats who cast a reform-side vote over the decade, the data in this section would seem to indicate the same direction.

Sources: House roll call 56, July 7, 2021 (malegislature.gov); stipends from CTHRU payroll dataset 9ttk-7vz6 (cthru.data.socrata.com); General Appropriations Acts FY2022–FY2025 (malegislature.gov); Parcenomics analysis of earmarks to the city or town government (first measure) by House district.

On February 25, 2025, the House voted on an amendment by Minority Leader Bradley Jones Jr. that would let the State Auditor audit the House. Nearly four months earlier, 72% of voters had said she could. The amendment failed, 24 to 127. One Democrat voted for it.

That vote fits a pattern. This report uses 152 recorded roll calls from 2017 to 2026 on the Legislature's own rules, pay, transparency and leadership: term limits for the Speaker (Robert DeLeo until December 2020, then Ronald Mariano) and the Senate President (Stanley Rosenberg, Harriette Chandler, then Karen Spilka from July 2018), public committee votes, time

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to read bills, audits and the public records law. In the House nearly every reform failed by about the same margin, the Republican caucus plus a handful of Democrats.

The test asks whether what a legislator receives from the institution predicts how he or she votes on the institution.

What members receive

Every senator holds a paid post, most assigned by Senate President Spilka. In the House about 109 of 160 members do, most assigned by Speaker Mariano; the Minority Leaders, Sen. Bruce Tarr and Rep. Bradley Jones Jr., assign the Republican posts. In 2025 those stipends came to $5.43 million for 149 members. Most members also win local earmarks.

Stipends track votes; a member's earmarks do not predict them

In the House, members holding any paid post almost never voted the reform side. Among House Democrats without a stipend, 17.9% cast at least one reform-side vote on a divided roll call. Among stipend holders it was 5 of 349 member-sessions, and none in the top two tiers. Because holders so rarely voted the reform side, the per-dollar estimate among Democrats, an odds ratio of 0.34 per $10,000 of stipend (95% interval 0.24–0.48), mainly restates that divide; it does not measure the effect of each added dollar. In the Senate, about one in five members of the middle tiers broke ranks at some point; none of the 40 top-tier member-sessions did.

The test also ran from money to vote: does a member's earmark money predict his or her vote on the institution? The result was null on both counts tried. Counted by sponsor, as the dollars for named local recipients in the member's own amendments adopted on the floor (a sponsor count, not one of the three place measures), the odds ratio is 0.88 per $100,000 (interval 0.76–1.02). Counted as the earmarks to the city and town governments in the district (first measure), the estimate is also not significant ($p = 0.16$). That test does not ask the reverse question, whether a member's votes go with the money that later reaches the district.

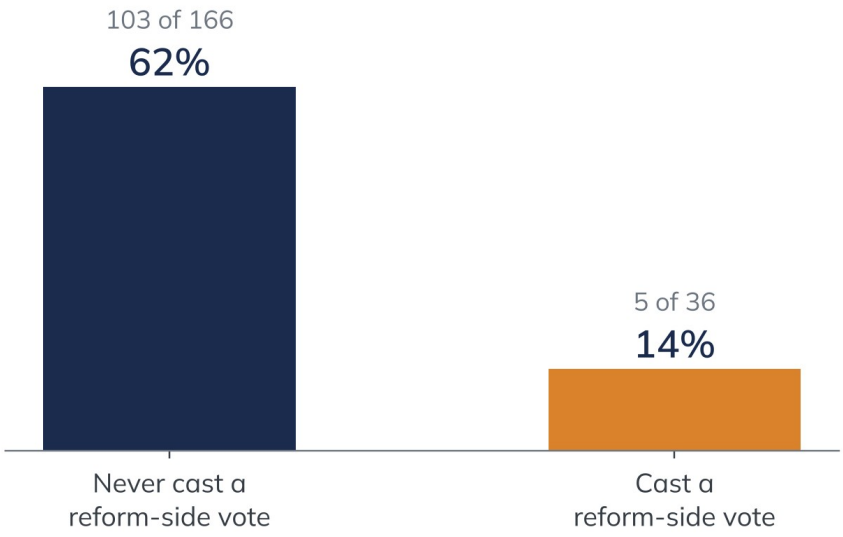
Fewer promotions, not lost posts

House Democrats who cast a reform-side vote were not stripped of posts at a higher rate. What changed was promotion. Of House Democrats who began a session with no stipend, 62% of those who never cast a reform-side vote were drawing one by the session's second year, 103 of 166. Of those who did, 14% were, 5 of 36.

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House Democrats who voted for reform were rarely promoted

Of House Democrats starting a session with no stipend, share drawing one by year two, 2017–2026



Source: Parcenomics analysis of House Democrats with no stipend the year before the session and a stipend in the session's second year; stipends from CTHRU payroll dataset 9ttk-7vz6 (cthru.data.socrata.com); votes from malegislature.gov roll calls.

Measured in dollars, reform voters' stipends rose about $10,500 less than their colleagues' over a session, in 2025 dollars. The gap holds when the starting stipend, seniority and each member's dissent rate on ordinary bills are held constant, and when any one General Court is dropped.

In the House, district money goes with the post

The money-to-vote test was null. The reverse test asks whether the earmark money reaching a member's district goes with the member's post and votes. Each member-session from 2017 to 2026 is matched to the enacted earmarks to the city and town governments in the district (first measure) in that session's budgets, FY2018–FY2026. Among House Democrats that is 635 member-sessions, 1,143 district-years and $166 million.

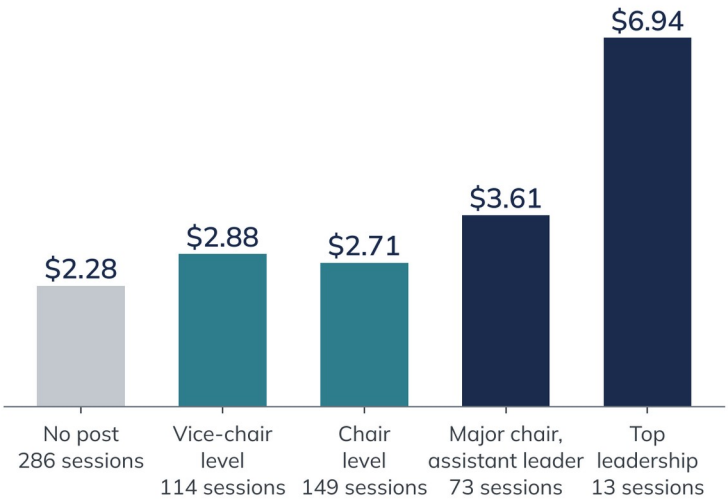
- Stipend. Holding district population, seniority, election margin and the session constant, district money per resident is 7.2% higher for each $10,000 of the member's stipend going into the session ($p < 0.001$). Unadjusted, the median district received $2.28 per resident a year when its member held no post and $6.94 in the 13 sessions of top leadership.
- Reform votes. On the same basis, districts of members who cast a reform-side vote received 14% less per resident ($p = 0.031$). Their 119 district-years drew $10.0 million, $1.92 per resident a year, against $3.45 for the other 1,024 ($156 million); at the adjusted rate the gap is about $2.5 million. It is 14% to 45% less in every cut tried: without Suffolk County, without the Speaker and the Ways and Means chair, in each half of the decade and with region fixed effects (p of 0.038 or less throughout). In the same cuts the stipend estimate runs from 5% to 10% per $10,000 (p of 0.038 or less).

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- Promotion. When a member moved up a stipend tier during the session, the district's money rose 11% against the prior session (p = 0.043; 224 promotions in 544 member-sessions); on the wider measures it rose 10% (p = 0.020 and 0.028).
- Senate. Every senator holds a paid post. On this measure the data would seem to indicate that district money rises with the stipend, 4% per $10,000 (p = 0.019), and is higher, not lower, where the senator cast a reform-side vote: 33% more per resident (p = 0.001). That rests on 12 senators in 26 sessions. On the wider measures neither result holds, and the reform-side estimate turns negative (p of 0.34 or more). Promotion shows nothing (p = 0.56).

In the House, district earmark money is highest where the Democrat holds a top post

Median earmarks to the city or town government (first measure), $ per resident a year, FY2018–FY2026



Source: Parcenomics analysis of House Democrats, General Courts 190–194 (2017–2026), stipend tier from CTHRU payroll dataset 9ttk-7vz6 (cthru.data.socrata.com) the year before the session; earmarks to the city or town government (first measure) in the General Appropriations Acts FY2018–FY2026 (malegislature.gov), by House district. Medians, not adjusted.

On the wider measures, which add organizations and state facilities placed in the district, the House pattern runs the same way with less precision: the stipend estimate is about 10% (p = 0.056 and 0.051), and the reform-vote gap, 18% and 17%, is not significant until Suffolk County is set aside (23% and 21%, p of 0.022 or less). The reform-vote result rests on the same 42 members as the promotion result, and only two of their reform-side sessions fall in 2023–2026. On that sample it would seem to indicate a link between reform votes and district money; it does not establish one. Nor can it show which way any influence runs: leaders may favor loyal members' districts, or members whose districts already draw more may be likelier to stay loyal and to be promoted. It is consistent with section 6, where a House member's documented break with leadership coincides with less earmark money for the town in later budgets.

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This section and section 6 answer different questions. Section 6 asks how well posts, stipends, giving and connections predict each town's ten-year total; towns differ so much by size that together they add less than one point. This section compares House districts with one another, and there the post goes with more money: 7.2% per $10,000 of stipend, a real difference but a small one next to the differences that size makes between towns.

What this cannot show

The causal direction cannot be separated. Leaders choose lieutenants who share their views of how the institution should run, and a member who wants the Speaker's term limited is unlikely to be made his deputy. Rules votes are also party votes, and a stipend predicts loyalty on ordinary contested bills too. The institutional signal is several times stronger in the House and only modestly stronger in the Senate. The House result rests on 42 Democrats who ever cast a divided reform vote, most in 2019–2021; in each of the last two sessions, one did. On a sample that thin, the House pattern would seem to indicate a link between reform votes and slower promotion; it does not establish one. Nothing here shows that anyone traded a vote for a post. It shows that the members who vote to limit the institution are, with few exceptions, the members it does not promote.

The pool and the reforms

The reward pool is small. In FY2026 stipends came to $5.4 million. Enacted local earmarks came to $27.4 million to city and town governments, $105.0 million placed in the city or town and $158.4 million counting everything placed. With stipends the pool is $32.9 million, $110.5 million or $163.8 million: 0.05%, 0.18% or 0.27% of a $60.2 billion budget.

Three gaps the state has documented have a price for a single fiscal year:

Documented gap	Year	Statutory or recommended level	Paid	Gap for the year
Rural School Aid at the Special Commission's 2022 recommendation	FY2026	$60.0M	$16.0M	$44.0M
Regional school transportation at the statutory 100%	FY2025	$117.2M	$99.5M	$17.8M
TAFDC grant increase for families with children (Senate amendment 522), six months from January 2026	FY2026	$20.2M	$0	$20.2M
Total				**$82.0M**

Sources: DESE Rural School Aid allocations (FY2026 includes a $4M supplemental) and transportation reimbursements; FY2026-S3-522 amendment text (a six-month cost; a full year would be about twice that); the FY2026 pool, earmarks plus 2025 CTHRU stipends, is $32.9M to city and town governments, $110.5M placed in the city or town and $163.8M counting everything placed (Parcenomics analysis of the FY2026 General Appropriations Act, malegislature.gov, and CTHRU payroll, cthru.data.socrata.com).

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Together they come to $82.0 million: 249% of the pool counting earmarks to city and town governments, 74% counting earmarks placed in the city or town, and 50% counting everything placed. The cash-assistance line counts only the TAFDC portion of the Senate's FY2026 amendment 522, filed by Assistant Majority Leader Sal DiDomenico, which would have raised grants for families with children by $20.2 million for the six months from January 2026. The full amendment, including EAEDC grants for elderly and disabled adults, was $30.4 million. It had 20 signers, half of the 40 senators, and was rejected in a bundle without a recorded vote.

The comparison has limits. Earmarks pay for real things, a food pantry or a fire truck, and those programs have defenders. Moving the money would take a vote. Counting everything placed, the pool is about twice the cost of the three gaps; counting earmarks placed in the city or town, 1.3 times; counting earmarks to city and town governments, 0.40 times.

If power barely moves the money statewide, what do the rewards buy? On this evidence, not the division of the budget as a whole. They line up with the institution itself: who rises and who waits, and in the House, how much earmark money reaches the district.

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8. The squeeze

Section summary

Town fixed costs are a larger pile than earmarks. From FY2016 to FY2025 municipal health insurance rose $1.43 billion, 54%, against 24.9% for nine years at 2.5%. Local earmarks in the nine budgets FY2017–FY2025 equal 13% to 45% of that increase alone, depending on the measure, and an earmark is a one-year appropriation. State aid covered 22.0% of town general-fund spending in FY2025, against 25.9% in FY2006; for the median town, 11.5% against 14.1%.

One town's nine years

Topsfield, an Essex County town of 6,564, spent $1,556,580 on health insurance in FY2016 and $2,332,680 in FY2025, $776,100 more, an increase of 50%. Nine years at 2.5% would have added 24.9%.

Over the nine budgets FY2017–FY2025, earmarks to the town government came to $295,000: $75,000 for an elevator in the town hall, $50,000 each for Hood Pond and a rail trail, and smaller sums for COVID-19 costs, public safety, economic development and the downtown. Three of the nine budgets had none. Together the earmarks equal 38% of the health-insurance increase. Each was a one-year appropriation; the higher cost recurs every year.

Over a longer span, state aid lost ground. Topsfield's gross aid rose from $2.01 million in FY2006 to $2.58 million in FY2025, 28%, while Boston-area prices rose 55%. In real terms its aid fell 17%.

Topsfield sits near the middle on two of the three counts. The median town received $297,550 in earmarks to its government over the nine budgets, and the median increase in health insurance was $785,703. On aid it did worse than the median town, whose aid fell 5.7% in real terms.

Sources: DLS Municipal Databank, Schedule A health insurance and Revenue by Source (dls-gw.dor.state.ma.us); General Appropriations Acts FY2017–FY2025 (malegislature.gov); CPI-U Boston-Cambridge-Newton (BLS, via FRED); Parcenomics analysis.

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An earmark is a one-year appropriation. A town's fixed costs recur in every later budget. Over the nine budgets from FY2017 to FY2025, in nominal dollars, the piles compare as follows.

Pile, nine budgets FY2017–FY2025	Towns	Amount	Note
Allowed growth in the levy limit	351	$7,588.5M	$4,138.9M from the 2.5% allowance, $3,449.6M from new growth
Increase in fixed costs (benefits, retirement, insurance), FY2016 to FY2025	346	$2,191.1M	$1,162.5M above a 2.5%-a-year path
Increase in health insurance, FY2016 to FY2025	342	$1,432.5M	$771.8M above a 2.5%-a-year path
Local earmarks, to the city or town government	351	$187.2M	Enacted, FY2017–FY2025 budgets
Local earmarks, placed in the city or town	351	$594.3M	Adds organizations
Local earmarks, everything placed	351	$653.0M	Adds state facilities and rate add-ons

Sources: DLS Municipal Databank (levy limit and new growth; Schedule A fixed costs; health insurance, Schedule A Parts 2 and 6), towns reporting in both FY2016 and FY2025 (dls-gw.dor.state.ma.us); earmarks from the General Appropriations Acts FY2017–FY2025 (malegislature.gov). Parcenomics analysis. Nominal dollars.

Health insurance rose 54.0% in those towns, from $2.65 billion in FY2016 to $4.09 billion in FY2025, against 24.9% for nine years at 2.5%. All fixed costs rose 53.0%, from $4.13 billion to $6.32 billion. New growth is the added levy on new construction and improvements.

Over the same nine budgets, earmarks equal 13.0% of the health-insurance increase counting earmarks to city and town governments, 41.2% counting earmarks placed in the city or town and 45.2% counting everything placed (towns that reported health insurance in both years). The typical town shows the same order of size. The median town received $297,550 in earmarks to its government over the nine budgets, and the median increase in a town's health insurance was $785,703; the two medians are taken separately. Fifty of the 351 cities and towns received no earmark to their governments in those budgets.

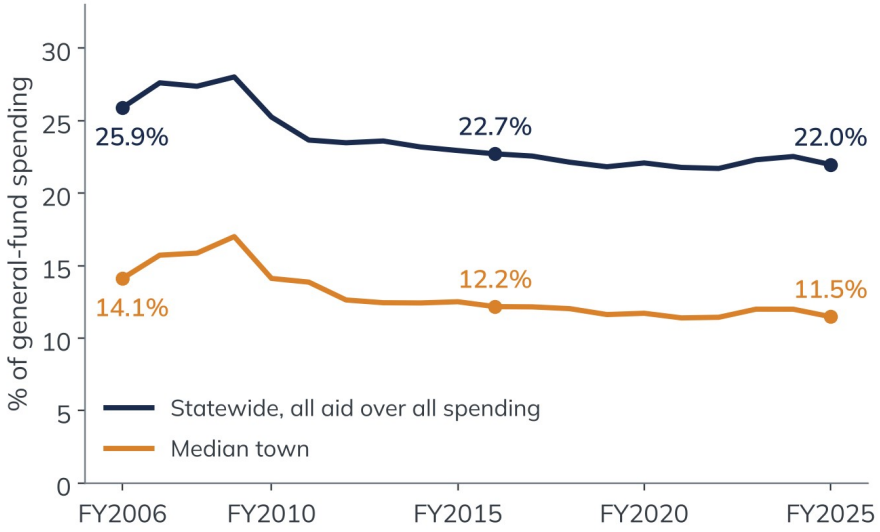
State aid as a share of town spending

Gross cherry-sheet aid covered 25.9% of town general-fund spending in FY2006, 22.7% in FY2016 and 22.0% in FY2025: $4.55 billion of $17.58 billion, and $7.55 billion of $34.37 billion. The median town's share was lower and fell further, from 14.1% to 12.2% to 11.5%. The statewide figure is weighted toward the largest places, where aid is a larger part of the budget: in FY2025, 26.5% in the largest fifth of towns and 9.6% in the smallest.

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State aid covers a smaller share of town spending than in FY2006, and less still for the typical town

Gross cherry-sheet aid as a share of general-fund spending, FY2006–FY2025



Source: Parcenomics analysis of the DLS Municipal Databank, Revenue by Source (state aid) and Schedule A general-fund expenditures (dls-gw.dor.state.ma.us); 346 towns reporting in FY2025.

Part of the earlier decline is a receipt that phased out: about $313 million in FY2010 that the itemized cherry sheet does not show, consistent with school-building reimbursements and gone by FY2024. On itemized receipts alone, the statewide share was 21.9% in FY2016 and 22.0% in FY2025, flat over the decade, while the median town's share fell. Net of the charges the state assesses on the same cherry sheet (charter and school-choice tuition, transit, county and other assessments), aid covered 22.1% of spending in FY2010, the first year the charges are itemized, and 17.9% in FY2025. The charges grew from $611 million to $1.41 billion.

Against inflation and the 2½% limit

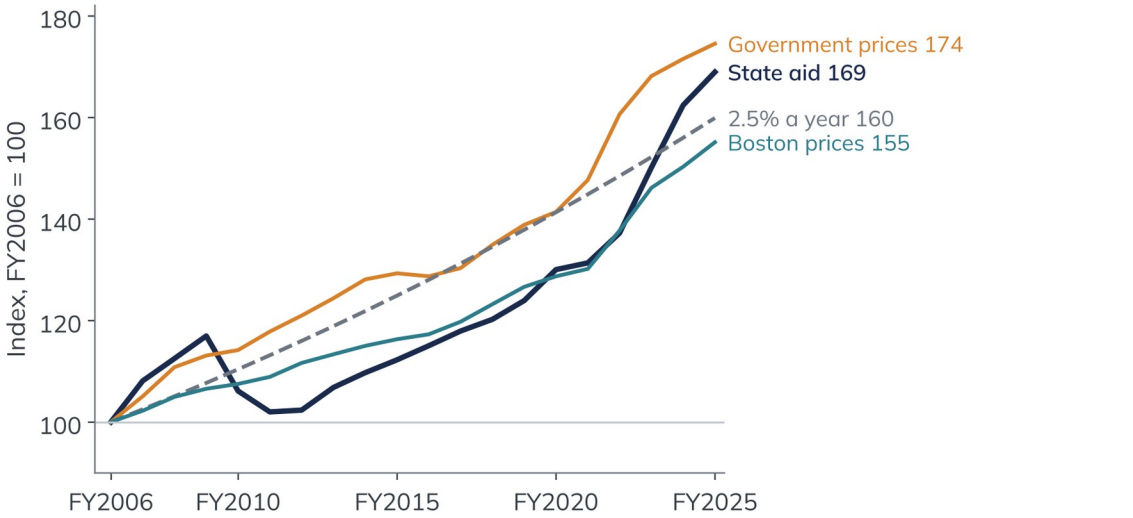
Proposition 2½ lets a town's levy limit grow 2.5% a year, plus new growth. From FY2006 to FY2025 that path compounds to 59.9%. Over the same years Boston-area consumer prices rose 55.1%, U.S. consumer prices 59.7% and the federal price index for state and local government purchases 74.5%. From FY2016 to FY2025 all three ran above the path: Boston-area prices rose 32.2%, against 24.9%.

Statewide gross aid to all 351 municipalities rose from $4.55 billion in FY2006 to $7.69 billion in FY2025. That kept pace with consumer prices, 8.9% more in real terms on the Boston index, but not with the government price index, 3.2% less. Town by town the result is less even: 199 of 351 towns received less in FY2025 than their FY2006 aid grown by Boston-area prices, and 240 less than it grown by the government price index. The median town's change was –5.7% in real terms on the Boston index and –16.2% on the government index. The FY2006 base includes about $313 million of receipts the cherry sheet does not itemize; on itemized receipts from FY2010, aid grew from $4.52 billion to $7.69 billion, 18.0% in real terms on the Boston index.

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Statewide aid kept pace with consumer prices but not with the cost of what governments buy

Index, FY2006 = 100. State aid to all 351 towns; government prices = BEA state and local deflator



Source: Parcenomics analysis of gross aid from DLS Revenue by Source, all 351 municipalities (dls-gw.dor.state.ma.us); CPI-U Boston-Cambridge-Newton and U.S. city average (BLS) and the BEA implicit price deflator for state and local government, via FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. Fiscal-year averages.

Across kinds of towns

The squeeze reaches nearly every kind of town. Fixed costs grew faster than the town's allowed levy growth in 60.5% of town-years among the fifth of towns with the least new growth relative to their levy limit, and in 54.1% among the fifth with the most. Grouping by state-owned land or by population barely separates towns: 58.8% against 55.3% from the least to the most state land, and 54.1% against 54.9% from the smallest fifth to the largest.

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What these figures do not show

Spending figures stop at FY2025: on October 19, 2026, 55 of 351 towns had filed FY2026 spending with the Division of Local Services. Pensions are not a separate public series; the state's municipal spending reports combine retirement with health insurance, other benefits and insurance as fixed costs. Cherry-sheet detail before FY2010 could not be retrieved, so net figures begin in FY2010. Town series break when costs move between budget lines or into the state's Group Insurance Commission, so statewide sums are steadier than any one town's. Outside the inflation passage the figures are nominal dollars. They are associations and do not measure cause.

A caveat on the years ahead. The comparison above ends in FY2025, and the signals since have turned. Consumer prices rose 3.7% in the 12 months to September 2026, or 2.6% excluding food and energy. On September 16 the Federal Reserve raised its target range for the first time since 2023, to 3.75%–4%, saying inflation "remains elevated." The ten-year Treasury yield closed at 5.09% on October 16, after reaching 5.31% earlier in the month. Should inflation hold above 2.5%, the gap between what the levy may raise and what fixed costs require would widen each year, and the pressure on municipalities described in this section would mount. Higher yields would also tend to raise what towns pay to borrow for capital projects.

Sources: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Consumer Price Index, September 2026 (released October 14, 2026); Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, FOMC statement, September 16, 2026; U.S. Department of the Treasury, Daily Treasury Par Yield Curve Rates, October 2026.

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9. The Fairness Index

Section summary

On the Fairness Index, all state aid follows need and discretionary money follows size. The median all-aid score rises from 36 in the least needy fifth of towns to 59 in the neediest, largely through Chapter 70. On discretionary money the smallest fifth scores 91.5 at the median and the largest 36.6. Eighty-seven towns, home to 2.8 million people, stay low on both scopes under every weighting.

Two acres of forest

Savoy, in the Berkshire hills, holds 12,198 acres of state land, including Savoy Mountain State Forest: 53% of the town. Plymouth holds 11,885 acres, including Myles Standish State Forest: 18% of the town. In FY2024 the state's payment in lieu of taxes on that land was $132,040 to Savoy and $1,210,586 to Plymouth. Per acre, Savoy received $11 and Plymouth $102, 9.4 times as much ($1,210,586 ÷ 11,885 acres = $101.86; $132,040 ÷ 12,198 acres = $10.82). The Auditor's study prints 9.2, which these figures do not reproduce. The payment follows the value of the land, $10.1 million in Savoy and $92.7 million in Plymouth. The comparison is State Auditor Diana DiZoglio's, from her office's January 2025 study of the program.

Divide by residents instead and the order reverses. Savoy has 795 people, so its payment came to $166 a resident. Plymouth, with 63,953, received $19 a resident.

Both comparisons are correct. They answer different questions, which is why the Fairness Index sets four measures side by side: the Equal lens counts residents, and the Burden lens divides the state-land payment by acres.

Sources: Office of the State Auditor, Division of Local Mandates, *Pursuing Equitable State-Owned Land Reimbursements for Municipalities*, January 24, 2025, Figure 14 (mass.gov/auditor); U.S. Census Bureau ACS 2020–2024; Parcenomics arithmetic.

No single measure is the definition of fair. The Fairness Index puts four of them side by side for every town.

For each town it compares the state money the town received over ten years with what it would have received if the same pool had been divided on one measure alone:

- Equal: per resident.
- Need: residents weighted by poverty, income and property wealth, so a resident of the neediest town counts three times a resident of the least needy.
- Burden: each program divided by what it pays for, such as pupils for school aid, road miles for Chapter 90 and state-owned acres for the state-land payment.
- Effort: residents weighted by how much of their income goes to residential property tax.

A score of 50 means the town received exactly the share that measure would give it. Half the share scores 25 and double scores 75. The four scores are averaged at equal weight. The blend tracks the Equal lens closely (see Methods), which is why the four scores are shown

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separately here and on every town page. The index then tries every weighting with each measure between 10% and 40%, 231 in all, and flags a town only when its result holds under all of them.

There are two scopes. The headline covers all aid distributed through the state budget to the town and its school districts, state and federal: $93.1 billion over ten years, of which 9.6% is federal money passed through state appropriations. Formula aid is counted at its gross amount; competitive grants and enacted local earmarks to the city or town government are added. The second covers discretionary money only, the $2.52 billion in competitive grants and $0.21 billion in local earmarks to city and town governments.

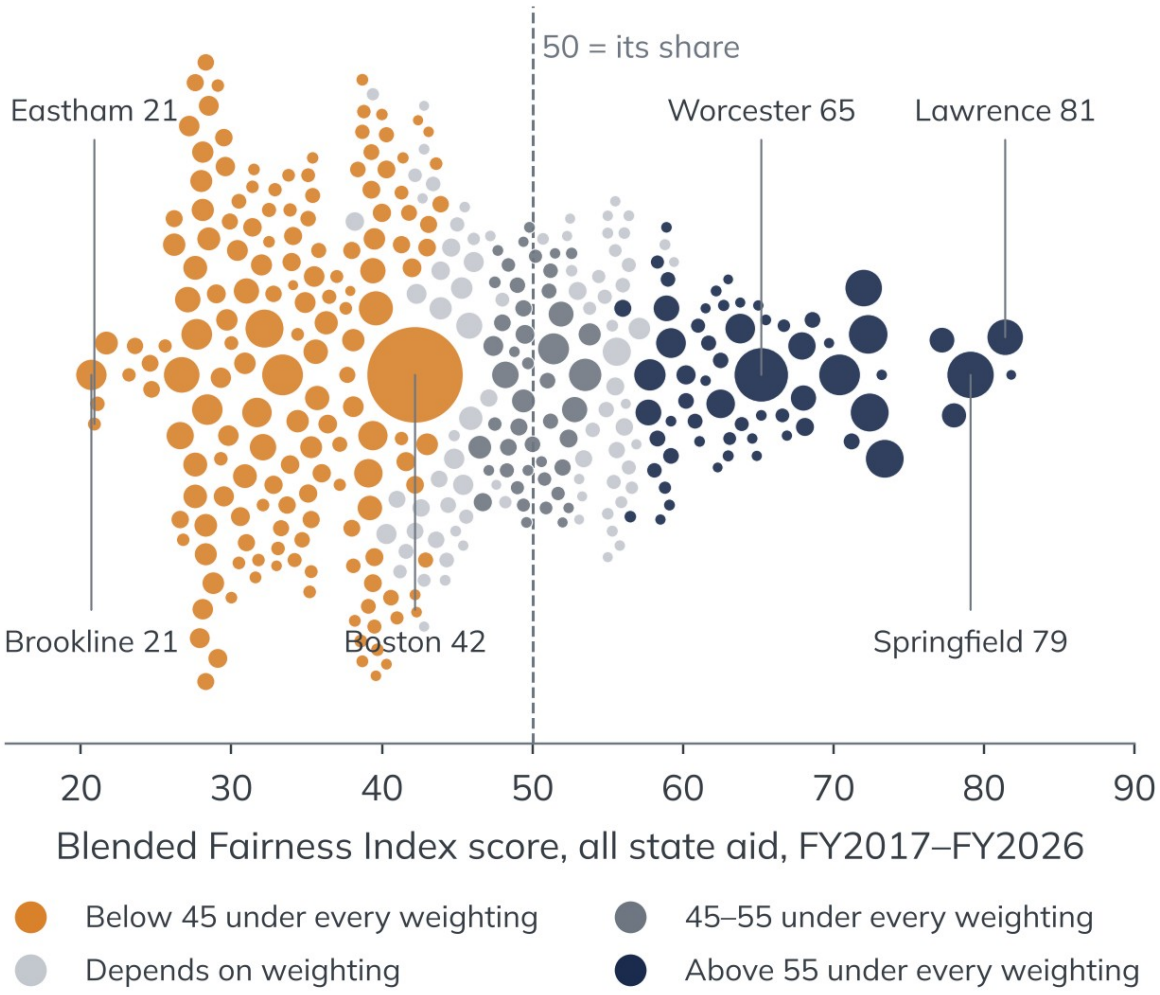
All state aid follows need

On all aid, 229 of 351 towns score below 50, and the median is 43.4. That is arithmetic, not a deficit: expected amounts add up to the pool, so a smaller number of large cities well above their share balances a larger number of towns below it.

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229 of 351 towns score below 50 on all state aid; the neediest cities score well above

One circle per town; area shows population



Source: Parcenomics analysis of DESE Chapter 70 and circuit-breaker data (doe.mass.edu), DLS cherry sheets (dls-gw.dor.state.ma.us), CTHRU statewide spending (cthru.data.socrata.com) and General Appropriations Acts FY2017–FY2026 (malegislature.gov); population from U.S. Census Bureau ACS 2020–2024. Method in this section and in Methods.

The result holds for most towns. Under every weighting tested, 162 towns stay below 45 and 61 stay above 55; 46 stay near 50, and 82 depend on the weighting. The 162 consistently low towns hold 55% of the state's population.

The order follows need. The median score rises from 36 in the least needy fifth of towns to 59 in the neediest fifth. Lawrence (81), Springfield (79), Holyoke (78) and Chelsea (77) are near the top. Gosnold, with 31 residents, ranks first because $7.7 million over ten years is large against any population that small. The lowest include Cape Cod towns and affluent suburbs: Eastham (21), Brookline (21), Falmouth (22) and Chatham (23). This is largely the Chapter 70 formula

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doing what it was built to do. Gross Chapter 70 is 61% of the pool, and school programs together are 77%.

The four lens scores and the blend for the towns named in this section:

Town	Equal	Need	Burden	Effort	Blend
Gosnold	85	86	73	84	82
Lawrence	83	75	76	91	81
Springfield	83	74	76	83	79
Holyoke	80	71	77	84	78
Chelsea	81	73	74	81	77
North Adams	71	60	74	79	71
Stockbridge	35	45	45	44	42
Chatham	19	19	30	25	23
Falmouth	20	21	27	19	22
Williamstown	20	16	27	22	21
Eastham	20	20	28	15	21
Brookline	19	25	23	15	21
Median, all 351 towns	**43.4**	**49.2**	**42.5**	**41.8**	**43.4**

All state aid, FY2017–FY2026. 50 = the town's share on that lens; the blend is the average of the four. Source: Parcenomics analysis of DESE, DLS Municipal Databank, CTHRU and General Appropriations Acts data (the Fairness Index).

Discretionary money follows size

On discretionary money the order changes. The median score is 91.5 in the smallest fifth of towns and 36.6 in the largest. Under every weighting, 153 towns stay above 55 and 130 below 45. The lowest are Brookline (6), Seekonk (7) and Billerica (9), places that won little discretionary money for their size. This is the denominator problem of section 3 in another form.

Town	Equal	Need	Burden	Effort	Blend
Stockbridge	88	92	74	91	86
Billerica	8	12	8	8	9
Rehoboth	9	13	10	8	10
Seekonk	7	8	8	6	7
Median, all 351 towns	**53.2**	**56.2**	**52.0**	**52.2**	**53.8**

Discretionary money (competitive grants and earmarks to the city or town government), FY2017–FY2026. Source: Parcenomics analysis of CTHRU statewide spending and General Appropriations Acts data (the Fairness Index).

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Eighty-seven towns, home to 2.8 million people, stay low on both scopes under every weighting. Most are suburbs in Middlesex, Essex, Norfolk and Worcester counties.

The Berkshire picture

Berkshire County's 32 towns have a median all-aid score of 50, against 43 statewide, and a median discretionary score of 87, against 54. On discretionary money 26 of the 32 stay above 55 under every weighting. On all aid the county splits: nine consistently high, eight consistently low, four near 50 and 11 dependent on the weighting. North Adams is highest (71). Williamstown is lowest (21, 349th), in part because the census counts its college students as low-income residents. Stockbridge scores 42 on all aid and 86 on discretionary money.

What the index cannot tell you

- Chapter 70 dominates the all-aid score. Without it, the blend correlates with the headline score at 0.69; both versions are in the file.
- Effort is the least settled measure. Five reasonable ways to measure it disagree, with rank correlations from –0.17 to 0.75. As built, it rises with residents' income and with school spending above the required minimum (Methods).
- Regional Community Development Block Grant awards are paid to the lead town, which inflates the discretionary scores of towns such as Chesterfield, Truro, Shelburne and Russell.
- Census estimates count college students in population and poverty, which raises the need weight and lowers per-resident aid in Williamstown, Amherst and Northampton.
- Earmarks are enacted amounts, not payments.
- Ranks in the middle of the distribution are fragile: alternative methods move the median town 1 to 13 places and one town 156.
- A score says whether a town received its share of what the state spent. It does not say whether what the state spent was enough.

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10. Case studies

Section summary

Counting everything placed, the largest clause placed in a single town in ten budgets is the FY2026 $31 million for the state-run Pappas Rehabilitation Hospital for Children in Canton, a policy dispute over a state facility. In the same debate the Senate passed the Pappas amendment 39 to 0 and rejected, in a bundle without a vote, a $30.4 million increase in TAFDC and EAEDC cash grants. Thirty-five towns, home to 50,388 people, had no earmark placed in them in ten budgets on the second or third measure, and 33 of them rank in the top half of the state for competitive grant dollars per resident.

The prison that closed

A year before the administration proposed closing Pappas, it proposed closing MCI-Concord, the state's oldest men's prison. The Department of Correction announced the plan on January 24, 2024. Opened in 1878, the prison held about 300 men at half its capacity. The department put the saving at nearly $16 million a year in operating costs, about $53,000 a man, and said the closure removed the need for $190 million in capital projects. The state's prison population was the lowest in 35 years.

The prison closed in the summer of 2024. More than 200 employees moved to other prisons that needed staff, and the department reported that vacancies in security posts fell 48%. Rep. Simon Cataldo of Concord called it "a full-circle moment for my hometown." Sen. Mike Barrett said Concord was closer to gaining "the equivalent of a whole new neighborhood." Sen. Jamie Eldridge had pressed for the closure for months. Disposing of the land still requires the Legislature.

Anecdotally, on the department's and the press accounts, the two proposals parted where the jobs and the host town did. At Concord the jobs moved and the town stood to gain land; at Canton the jobs would have left and the town would have lost a hospital.

Sources: Department of Correction, "DOC announces plan to conclude operations at MCI-Concord," January 24, 2024 (mass.gov); GBH News, January 24 and July 18, 2024 (wgbh.org).

Every item in the budget can be justified at some level, and most have an advocate with standing. The two cases below were chosen because they sit at the extremes of the whole distribution.

The largest town-placed clause in ten years

The FY2026 budget directed "not less than $31,000,000" to the continued operation of the Pappas Rehabilitation Hospital for Children in Canton. Counting everything placed, the third measure, it is the largest clause placed in a single town in ten budgets: $31 million in Canton, six times the next largest ($5 million, also a state facility).

It is the Legislature funding the continued operation of a state-run Department of Public Health children's hospital, with 60 beds and 36 patients in January 2025, that the administration had

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proposed to close for an estimated $31 million saving. It is a policy dispute over a state facility, and the money is placed in Canton because the hospital is there. It counts on the third measure only: the clause does not name the town, and it pays for a state facility rather than a local organization. The town-level model in section 6 uses the second measure, so it does not include this clause.

The clause is a gross appropriation. At 36 patients it comes to about $861,000 a patient-year; at the census of 24 recorded in October 2025, $1.29 million. The Pappas Working Group's FY2024 figures give the cost both ways: $42.8 million gross, about $1.07 million a patient-year at an average census of 40, and a state share after federal Medicaid reimbursement of $25.6 million, about $640,000 a patient-year. On the other side of the ledger, MassHealth authorized 1,588,175 hours of pediatric home nursing for 573 children in 2024, and 517,866 of those hours were never delivered. At the state's rates they would have cost $27.9 million to $40.3 million. The comparison has a limit: the hours went unfilled mainly because there are not enough nurses.

The Legislature's case is serious. Pappas holds the only pediatric beds in the public health hospital system. The governor's own working group rated closure poorly and called the proposed Westfield unit a supplement, not a replacement. Staff say the falling census reflects admissions that were blocked. The administration's case is serious too: a rebuilt campus was priced at more than $440 million, and most of the January 2025 patients were adults waiting for a placement. The FY2027 budget dropped the $31 million language, and a special commission is due to report by December 31, 2026.

In the same May 2025 debate the Senate took up two amendments of about the same size. Amendment 543, filed by Sen. Dylan Fernandes, $31 million for Pappas and $4.8 million for the Pocasset Mental Health Center, passed 39 to 0. Amendment 522, filed by Assistant Majority Leader Sal DiDomenico, $30.4 million to raise TAFDC and EAEDC cash grants 10% from January 2026, reaching more than 106,000 people in TAFDC households, was rejected in a bundle without a vote. The Senate's choice has a defense: 543 refused a proposed cut inside lines already funded, while 522 started a permanent increase that would cost about twice as much in a full year, every year. The Senate budget had also already protected the April 2025 increase. The pairing still shows the pattern in section 5: a place with a building and a constituency, against a benefit spread across a state.

Ten budgets, no earmarks

Thirty-five towns, home to 50,388 people, had no enacted earmark placed in them in any of the ten budgets, on the second or the third measure. Every one has fewer than 5,300 residents. Counting only earmarks to the city or town government, 49 had none. The group spans rich and poor: Chilmark and Edgartown on Martha's Vineyard rank 350th and 344th of 351 on need; Savoy and Plainfield rank 15th and 27th.

The absence of earmarks is not the absence of state money. Thirty-three of the 35 rank in the top half of the state for competitive grant dollars per resident, and 20 in the top 50. Per-resident figures overstate small towns, as section 3 shows. Mount Washington is on the list

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and seventh in the state in competitive awards per resident. The list measures one channel, and it reflects how earmarks are written: to a named organization or project, which small towns without a full-time staff or a local nonprofit rarely have. That is a capacity story as much as a power story. A test of administrative capacity points the same way. Among the smallest two fifths of towns, the third with the smallest town halls (47 towns, median population 954, median general-government spending $317,000 a year) score a median 0.52 on core infrastructure, and 4% have ever won a Complete Streets award. The third with the largest (median population 5,496, $1.76 million a year) score 1.03, and 47% have won one. Town-hall size and population rise together, so the two cannot be fully separated.

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11. The governor's instruments

Section summary

No veto of a local earmark by Governor Healey was found in FY2025 or FY2026; her instruments have been the mid-year cut and the hold. In January 2024 her 9C cuts halved local earmarks, and in FY2026 she held all $125 million of them from July 4 to October 20, 2025, then released them in full (the administration's counts). Which earmarks survive is settled upstream, in conference, where the record does not show who decided.

The veto pen set down

In May 2017 the Senate adopted Amendment 862 to the FY2018 budget, filed by Sen. Ryan Fattman, a Webster Republican, with Sen. Michael Moore of Millbury: $30,000 for weed control in Lake Singletary in Millbury and Sutton. It went into the enacted budget as a clause in the watershed management line of the Department of Conservation and Recreation, item 2800-0101.

Governor Baker reduced that line. It was one of 169 items he vetoed or reduced that July, $320.3 million in all. The Legislature restored it: the House voted 121 to 33 on October 4, 2017, and the Senate 31 to 6. According to Sen. Moore's office, the $30,000 was among the money cut and restored.

That was the practice then. A governor struck local earmarks item by item, and the Legislature put most of them back by two-thirds votes. No veto of a local earmark by Governor Healey was found in FY2025 or FY2026. In FY2026 she held all $125 million of them for three and a half months and then released them, and no override was needed.

Sources: Senate Amendment 862 to S.3, FY2018; FY2018 General Appropriations Act, item 2800-0101; House Yea and Nay No. 219, October 4, 2017, and Senate roll call 153 of 2017 (malegislature.gov); Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation, FY2018 veto summary; Office of Sen. Michael Moore, October 20, 2017.

Governor Healey has largely set aside the line-item veto for local earmarks. In FY2024 she "largely avoided" vetoing them, in the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation's words, and no veto of a local earmark was found in FY2025 or FY2026. Her instruments have been the mid-year cut and the hold. In January 2024 her 9C cuts to the FY2024 budget halved local earmarks (the administration's count). Her FY2026 vetoes, 28 items worth $130.2 million, fell on statewide program lines. The one named institution was the Tufts veterinary school in Grafton, cut by $700,000. By contrast, Governor Baker's FY2017 vetoes eliminated or reduced 495 of 633 earmarks (the Foundation's count).

In FY2026 she used the hold. On July 4, 2025, she signed the FY2026 budget and froze all $125 million of its local earmarks (the administration's count), more than 1,100 items, citing federal cuts and a possible slowdown. On October 20, after the revenue estimate was certified, she released the money in full, three days before the Senate's override votes.

The hold changed the timing of the FY2026 earmarks, not their amount. The program vetoes fared worse: about $70.4 million was restored by override and about $60 million stood. Most of

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what stood was money the administration said had other funding, matched its own budget, or reflected a policy choice on drug coverage that the Legislature did not contest.

Which earmarks survive is settled upstream, in conference, where the record does not show who decided. In the FY2026 conference, the members who lost all or nearly all of their earmarks included the two senators who voted against both the Senate budget and the conference report, Republicans Ryan Fattman and Kelly Dooner. Anecdotally, the Boston Globe reported that Sen. Fattman lost all $500,000 and Sen. Dooner all but $15,000. Senate Minority Leader Bruce Tarr, who voted for the budget, said earmarks “shouldn’t depend on how a legislator votes.” The data show the association. They do not show the reason.

The levers and who holds them

Each lever below is held by an office that can use it under existing authority.

- Grant reporting. The Secretaries of Transportation, Energy and Environmental Affairs, and Economic Development publish award lists by town. A per-mile, per-bridge or per-job column could sit beside dollars per resident; section 3 puts the smallest fifth of towns at 4.9 times its share per resident and 1.47 by what each program pays for.
- Regional school transportation. The Ways and Means chairs, Aaron Michlewitz and Michael Rodrigues, write the appropriation: 100% in statute, subject to appropriation; 80% to 96% in FY2021–FY2025, $65.5 million below 100% over five years.
- Holds. The Secretary of Administration and Finance carries out holds. The FY2026 hold covered $125 million of local earmarks (the administration’s count), July 4 to October 20, 2025. A published list with release dates would tell towns what to plan around.
- Rules and posts. Speaker Ronald Mariano and Senate President Karen Spilka assign most paid posts, and the next joint rules come in January 2027. Among House Democrats starting a session without a stipend, 14% of reform-side voters drew one by the second year, against 62% of the rest (section 7).

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Methods and limits

Terms in plain English

The report uses a few statistical terms. Every finding is an association between numbers; none shows that one thing caused another.

- Median: the middle value. Half the towns are above it and half below. Unlike an average, one very large city cannot pull it up or down.
- Per resident: a town's dollars divided by its population, so towns of different sizes can be compared.
- Smallest fifth, largest fifth: the 351 towns ranked by population and split into five groups of about 70.
- Times its share: what a town or group received divided by what an even split would give it. 1.0 is exactly its share, 2.0 is twice, 0.5 is half. The burden index is read the same way.
- The model, and "more than the model expects": a statistical model predicts each town's money from facts about it, such as population, road miles, jobs, need and institutions. "More than the model expects" means more than towns with the same facts received.
- Log dollars: the model compares towns by percentage differences rather than raw dollars, so a very large town does not swamp a very small one.
- R^2 (R-squared): the share of the differences between towns that a model accounts for, from 0% to 100%.
- Out of sample, cross-validated: the model is built on some towns and tested on towns it has not seen, repeated until every town has been tested. It keeps a model from looking better than it is by memorizing the data.
- Standard deviation: a common yardstick for how spread out a set of numbers is, roughly the typical distance from the average. "Per standard deviation of exposure" compares towns one typical step apart in how much of the decade they were represented by a leader.
- p, or p-value: how likely a pattern at least this strong would appear by chance alone if there were no real link. $p < 0.001$ means less than 1 chance in 1,000; $p = 0.015$ means about 1.5 in 100. By common convention, a value under 0.05, 1 in 20, is treated as unlikely to be chance. A small p does not say the pattern is large, and it does not show cause.
- 95% interval: the range of values the data are consistent with. Ranges built this way contain the true value 95 times in 100.
- Odds ratio: compares how likely something is for one group against another. 1.0 means no difference; 1.40 means the odds are 40% higher; 0.34 means about a third as high.
- Percentage point: the plain difference between two percentages. Going from 20% to 27% is 7 percentage points, a 35% increase.
- Rank correlation: how closely two rankings of the towns line up, from −1 to 1. 1 means the same order, 0 means no relation, and a negative number means opposite orders.

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- Controls, “at the same size,” region fixed effects: ways of comparing like with like, so that size or region cannot produce the result.
- After inflation, real dollars: dollars adjusted so that different years buy the same amount, using consumer prices in the Boston area (CPI-U) or the federal price index for what state and local governments buy.

Data sources

- Budget amendments, debate records and roll calls: malegislature.gov JSON API (/api/GeneralCourts/{gc}/Documents/{bill}/Branches/{House|Senate}/Amendments) and amendment text (/Bills/GetAmendmentContent/{gc}/{bill}/{n}/{chamber}/Content); https://malegislature.gov/Budget/FY2026/SenateDebate and equivalents for each year.
- Enacted budgets, vetoes and overrides: https://malegislature.gov/Budget/FY2026/FinalBudget and equivalents FY2017–FY2027; H.4250 Attachment A (FY2026 vetoes).
- Spending, payroll and budget-to-actual: CTHRU, https://cthru.data.socrata.com (datasets pegc-naaa, 9ttk-7vz6, kv7m-35wn).
- Competitive awards: agency award lists and press releases, including https://www.mass.gov/info-details/community-one-stop-for-growth-awards.
- Municipal finance, cherry sheets, Schedule A spending, health insurance, levy limits and new growth: DLS Municipal Databank, https://dls-gw.dor.state.ma.us/reports/rdPage.aspx.
- School finance: DESE Chapter 70, transportation and rural aid files, https://www.doe.mass.edu/finance/chapter70/ and https://www.doe.mass.edu/finance/transportation/.
- Roads and bridges: MassDOT Chapter 90 apportionment and Road Inventory, https://gis.massdot.state.ma.us/arcgis/rest/services/Roads/; FHWA National Bridge Inventory 2025, https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/bridge/nbi/2025/delimited/MA25.txt.
- Dams, floodplain and boundaries: DCR Office of Dam Safety via MassGIS; FEMA National Flood Hazard Layer.
- Prices: CPI-U Boston-Cambridge-Newton and U.S. city average (BLS series CUURA103SA0 and CPIAUCNS) and the BEA implicit price deflator for state and local government (A829RD3Q086SBEA), all via https://fred.stlouisfed.org.
- Population, income and housing: U.S. Census Bureau ACS 2020–2024 five-year estimates, via https://api.censusreporter.org.
- Campaign finance: OCPF, https://api.ocpf.us.

Data corrections, 18–21 October 2026

Two errors were found and fixed before this report. DESE numbers 33 towns differently from the Department of Revenue, and one file had read DESE numbers as DOR codes, which put $524.8 million of regional school payments on the wrong town in 31 towns; statewide totals did not change. Separately, five fiscal years had been credited to the General Court seated in

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January of the fiscal year rather than the one that enacted the budget; every year now carries its enacting court, on that court's district lines. No headline result reversed. Three within-town power results lost significance and are not reported: a House member moving into a top post, Senate Republican representation, and within-town Senate leadership tiers. The cross-town Senate stipend effect also fell back above p = 0.05 and is not reported.

A third issue surfaced on October 19. CTHRU records cherry-sheet aid as the cash paid after assessments for charter tuition, school choice and regional transit are deducted; ten-year Chapter 70 is $46.35 billion net against $57.10 billion gross. This report uses the gross DESE and cherry-sheet figures for all formula aid, as the Fairness Index does, and the town-level model was rerun with gross formula aid as its control; every power result reported here held. The old figures had also credited $9.01 billion of charter and virtual-school tuition to the town where each school sits, which put Hadley 8th in formula aid per resident; on gross formula aid to the town government and its school districts, the basis the Fairness Index uses, it is 294th.

A fourth correction was made on October 21. The first measure had counted every clause that named a town, whatever the recipient: a local organization named with the town, such as the Gloucester Marine Genomics Institute, a state facility such as the Pocasset Mental Health Center in Bourne, or a state agency program. It now counts only money to the city or town government: the government itself, its departments and schools, and municipal projects with no other recipient. Where the Comptroller's payment records show who was paid, they decide; otherwise the clause text does, read clause by clause where it is unclear. Organizations now count on the second measure, and state facilities, named state parks and beaches and state agency programs on the third. The first measure fell from $485 million to $215 million, and the Fairness Index, the district-money results and the town-level model were recomputed. The House district-money results keep their direction. The Senate results changed: on the first measure the data would seem to indicate that district money rises with the stipend and is higher for the 12 reform-side senators, where before nothing was significant; on the wider measures neither holds.

The Fairness Index: blend and lenses

Two features of the method bear on how the scores read. First, the blended score tracks the per-resident (Equal) lens closely: across the 351 towns the rank correlation between the blend and the Equal lens is 0.98 on all aid and 0.995 on discretionary money. A town's blended rank is close to its per-resident rank, which is why section 9 and every town page show the four lens scores separately. Second, the Effort lens divides the residential property tax by residents' income. In practice that rate rises with median household income (rank correlation 0.24) and with school spending above the required minimum (0.37), and falls with poverty (–0.26), so a town's Effort score reflects its spending choices and tax base as well as how heavily its residents are taxed. The lens is shown as built.

Named legislators

Legislators are named for facts of record: posts, stipends, sponsored amendments, enacted items, public roll-call votes and the money that reached their districts. Each association

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reported with a name is an association, not a finding of cause. The web edition carries a page for each legislator, with no composite score.

Known weaknesses

- House dispositions are inferred by matching amendment text against the consolidated amendments; the House records most amendments only as “Consolidated A–G.”
- Leadership base-text and conference money cannot be assigned to a member from the public record. Of the 61 enacted clauses of $950,000 or more placed in a town (second measure), 37 match no member’s amendment.
- Earmark figures are enacted text, not payments. A held or unspent earmark counts in full.
- Of $5.44 billion in enacted earmark clauses, 15% can be placed in a city or town counting everything placed, 13% placed in the city or town and 4% to the city or town government; the large clauses are statewide program floors.
- Section 8’s cost figures come from the Division of Local Services: FY2026 spending is incomplete (55 of 351 towns filed), pensions are not separable from other fixed costs, and cherry-sheet detail before FY2010 could not be retrieved.
- Section 11’s counts of local earmarks are the administration’s and the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation’s; they match none of the three measures.
- Competitive grants appear at two totals. $2.73 billion is the amount awarded in the award catalog (sections 1 and 3). The Comptroller’s payments to town governments and their school districts total $2.52 billion, the figure the Summary and the Fairness Index use; payments to all recipients, including organizations other than town governments, total $3.68 billion.
- Merit scores rest on 300-character excerpts for 56% of rows and are not used.
- Capacity is proxied by population band; form-of-government data could not be obtained in a consistent form for all towns.
- Matching each grant program to its burden measure is judgment; every match is listed, and a second set of plausible measures leaves the rankings close (rank correlation 0.94). Sixty-seven western towns have no digital FEMA flood map, and their resilience grants are left out of the burden index rather than guessed.
- Aid to towns in regional school districts is an attribution by enrollment; no compiled source gives each member town’s assessment.
- The breadcrumbs result is association. The House sample of reform voters is small and aging.
- The Secretary of State’s lobbyist registry blocks automated access, so lobbying is not part of these tests.

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