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EDITORIAL

Repeat after us: pass these worthy bills



The Massachusetts State House, as depicted on a tour bus.

WITH THE LEGISLATURE racing to finish its business before the current session ends, some bills are bound to fall by the wayside — which is where many of them belong. But other pieces of pending legislation shouldn't get lost in the scramble. In rough order of importance, here's the Globe's take on how Massachusetts legislators should set their priorities before going on vacation.

■ **Zoning reform** might be the highest-impact legislation awaiting action. Reworking the rules that govern how land is developed could reshape the state's built landscape in the decades to come by promoting more dense, transit-oriented smart growth.

■ This might be the last chance for the state to get back on track in its effort to meet an ambitious 2020 carbon-emissions goal set under the Patrick administration. Success likely depends on whether lawmakers sign off on energy legislation that would **invite more Canadian hydropower and wind-generated electricity** into Massachusetts.

■ Many Massachusetts families can't afford dental care — or lack easy access to a dentist. An innovative bill would create a class of advanced dental hygienists who would be allowed to perform basic procedures, such as treating cavities, at lower costs. The Massachusetts Dental Society, which opposes the bill, says these hygienists would receive only "minimal training." Actually, the law proposes rigorous education, and dental therapists would have to work under the supervision of a dentist.

■ Some Massachusetts correctional facilities have violated a two-year-old law that prohibits them from shackling female prisoners during labor. A new round of proposed **anti-shackling legislation** would strengthen the statute and help assure compliance.

■ Criminal records can make it difficult for young offenders to find a job, get into college, or borrow money. An **expungement bill** would create a process by which certain nonviolent juvenile offenses could be removed from a criminal record. It's a way to reduce the likelihood that a teen who makes bad choices will become a career criminal.

■ Massachusetts' child custody laws are outdated. The **Child-Centered Family Law bill** acknowledges a widely held belief that isn't always reflected in court orders: Children benefit from spending significant time with both parents. The legislation would encourage family-court judges to grant parents shared custody, with a child spending at least one-third of the time with each parent. The law would affect only the small portion of divorcing couples who rely on the courts for a custody agreement after negotiations or mediation fails — but those cases often drag on for months or years, causing irreparable damage to all involved.

■ A proposal to **raise to 21 the legal age to buy tobacco products** has met with some resistance from retailers who apparently value profits over their customers' health, but it has otherwise attracted widespread support. Studies have shown that most smokers get addicted as teens, and raising the age limit is a way to make it more difficult for them to start. Many Massachusetts communities already have enacted under-21 bans, with Lowell and Stoughton joining the ranks last week. A statewide law would be more efficient.

- Lawmakers should raise their glasses in favor of a **brewery bill** that would ease restrictions that deter small breweries from signing up with distributors and create economic uncertainty for those that do. What respectable legislator would want to limit the public's access to the state's many great craft beers?

If lawmakers feel squeezed for time after working through — and, of course, approving — all of the above bills, here are some ill-conceived pieces of legislation they can skip:

- A proposed **fracking ban** is a feel-good measure that will accomplish nothing, since no company wants to frack for oil or gas in Massachusetts anyway. Maybe legislators will next take a brave stand against coal mining in the Blue Hills?
- Health insurance companies shouldn't be forced to pay for unproven medical treatments. That's the case with so-called chronic Lyme disease. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention doesn't recognize the condition, since the bacteria is killed off rather quickly by antibiotics. A bill that would require insurers to pay for coverage of long-term Lyme disease is unsound.
- Once again, private ambulance companies are seeking passage of a bill that would allow municipalities, instead of insurers, to set ride rates. The result would be to make ambulance trips more expensive. Good for ambulance companies, bad for everyone else.
- Drum roll, please, for the worst bill of all: legislation mandating **GMO labeling for foods**. About two-thirds of all food sold in the United States contain genetically modified ingredients. Despite the unfounded hysteria GMOs provoke, they've been used safely for more than two decades. People who don't want to consume GMO products can buy non-GMO food, which is labeled as such. The bill would enshrine unscientific paranoia into law and be an embarrassment to a state that's home to so many leading scientists. Nuts — organic or otherwise — to that.