

Pols flip-flop on EBT cards to detriment of taxpayers

Uncovered recently by a large Boston metro newspaper, the dirt on how little monitoring by the state exists for its Electronic Benefit Transactions cards — used by those receiving cash assistance from the state after food stamps were phased out more than a decade ago — proves to be particularly disturbing. As a result, some cardholders have blatantly misused the assistance to purchase alcohol, tobacco and lottery tickets, among many other items that don't exactly qualify as "necessities."

Taking full advantage of a juicy opportunity to hammer Gov. Deval Patrick on the issue, Republican challenger Charlie Baker on Oct. 11 outlined proposals on how he would further modify welfare policy in the state if elected, including aligning the Bay State with 46 other states to only allow a maximum of five years of welfare benefits to any resident, while emphasizing the need to prevent spending abuse tied to the cards.

While politicians are often derided for moving at a molasses-like pace when implementing change, Democrats in the state Legislature bucked that habit for a moment in reaction to the EBT mess, as House Speaker Robert DeLeo announced Thursday that legislation would be moved on the floor of his chamber Monday to eliminate such misuse in a program that

last year doled out \$392 million in benefits to 70,000 households.

As much as Patrick and other state Democrats rightfully were criticized for how poorly the EBT system has dealt with such purchases, DeLeo's correct move was sadly preceded by Patrick's shot in the dark to try to pin the fault on Baker for the long-standing cracks within a system that has been in place for 14 years. While it might have sounded like a good soundbyte to finger Baker for having been a part of Gov. William Weld's administration when EBT cards were born, with a Democratic-controlled state Legislature and Patrick having been in office for almost four years, Patrick's finger should mostly be pointing back at himself when critiquing the plagued program.

Unfortunately, arriving at a solution and acting on it simply didn't happen until the proverbial pants were pulled down.

At that moment, there were at least two options: either pass the blame or try to fix the problem.

After Patrick's initial attempt at passing the blame failed to gain traction, there was the risk that it would be followed by more fruitless attempts to make something stick without addressing the problem.

Instead, DeLeo did the right thing to devise a fix, and to do it in about as expedient a manner as could ever be expected from a politician.

On Monday, with the news

having traveled over four-plus days of what was to transpire on the House floor, a bill was offered by Democrats aiming to rein in EBT card abuse.

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From a distance, one would have thought such a bill would have passed with ease, with the obvious solutions included in the proposed fix.

The bill, though, was blocked by House Republicans, showing no desire to actually work for their constituents, as they evidently were more concerned over the loss of the mallet that they had joyously been smashing over Democrats' heads on this issue. Could it be that if the bill had passed, it might actually solve a problem on Deval's watch, which his opponents might find too hard to swallow?

While some Statehouse pols might be more focused on scoring cheap political points, voters continue to beg for those who will serve in the people's best interest and work to find solutions to the problems that stand

before them.

In a pathetic effort to paint the blocking of the bill as being tied to some other motivation, some members of the Republican delegation laughingly cited it as being a rushed bill, meant to appease the Boston paper and the readers of that newspaper as well.

So we're to believe that politicians are forming their policy based on where a newspaper and its readers stand?

Those same politicians, though, weren't done, complaining about having to read the legislation — they might have to read! — as another reason for why it was blocked. It didn't matter that the bill had outlined that it would make it illegal for stores to sell items such as alcohol and tobacco to people using EBT cards, with Rep. George Peterson, R-Grafton, doing the honors to stop it in its tracks.

Showing how out of the loop Peterson was regarding the bill, he said, "We got in (Monday) morning and found out they wanted to move this bill." Evidently, when the House speaker spells out what will take place in more than four days, some within his own chamber choose to pay no attention, allowing them to claim ignorance when convenient.

Then Peterson went on to bemoan how the Democrats were seeking to "push stuff through," which was just comical after hearing these same politicians

admitting that the same bill has existed since July, having sat in committee since then, with it showing no signs of progression. With four months having passed since it first entered the committee, the whining of some politicians of the need for more time to read legislation makes one wonder if the state should foot the bill to hire them a reading tutor — or at least a few more aides to feed them the Cliff Notes versions of the bills.

Courtesy of the the work of the Boston newspaper, though, the stalled bill has found new life.

Beyond voicing concerns about having not read the legislation, Peterson seemed most interested to talk about the need to "flex our limited powers."

Peterson wasn't alone in being unable to comprehend that some politicians might actually want to fix an obvious problem sooner rather than later, as House Minority Leader Bradley Jones went so far as to question the motivations of those on the other side of the aisle.

When taking the time to digest such empty-headed resistance, it's amazing anything gets accomplished inside the Statehouse.

Undaunted, Democrats plan to present the bill again Thursday, but anticipate facing continued pressure on the proposal, with a number of prospective amendments to be offered by Republicans. Among those on the table would be to incorporate

a provision in the bill disallowing the purchase of lottery tickets through EBT cards.

If that was the only amendment on the agenda, any delays to passing the bill would likely be minimal and passage would virtually be assured. When accounting for other likely proposed amendments, though, including to impose lifetime limits, or to provide benefits only to U.S. citizens or legal residents, there is a strong possibility that the bill's passage could drag out or even where the bill might be killed.

"This came to (DeLeo's) attention now ... He does not think that EBTs should be used for alcohol, tobacco or lottery," said DeLeo spokesman Seth Gitell. "That is a real concern. Taxpayers shouldn't be paying for this."

Elaborating further, Rep. Vincent Pedone, D-Worcester, said "Every day that we don't do that, taxpayer dollars are being spent in that manner. I think we should be acting quickly."

With an ongoing desire by Republicans to clobber Patrick on the issue, though, to go with wanting their own imprint on the bill, cheap political points will likely continue to be scored, as taxpayers will be the only ones to lose, forced to continue to pay through the nose as a broken system remains unchanged.

(Andres Caamano is the Senior News Editor/NIE Director at The Gardner News.)