

Michael Epstein

527 Main Street • Ashfield, MA 01330

October 31, 2013

The Honorable William N. Brownsberger, Chair
The Honorable Aaron Michlewitz, Chair
Joint Committee on Public Service
State House
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Chairs Brownsberger and Michlewitz:

My name is Michael Epstein from Ashfield, Massachusetts. I am a MOSES member (Massachusetts Organization of State Engineers & Scientists) and I work for MassDOT as the District 2 Survey Supervisor. I thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony urging you to consider the unfair hardships with which H59 would burden many, many employees of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

In 1985, I moved to Massachusetts with my wife, a native of the Commonwealth, and our twenty-two month old son. I soon found a job as a land surveyor, my chosen profession, working for a company that had a contract with the Massachusetts Department of Public Works. I quickly advanced to the position of Party Chief on a survey crew performing surveys used to design and construct roads, bridges and bike paths for the Commonwealth, handling projects totaling millions and millions of dollars. State survey crews comprised of state employees performed identical surveys and often times we worked side-by-side on the same projects. The fact is I was as much of a public servant as they were. Life was good.

Eight years and another son later, our lives as we knew it, came to an abrupt end. My wife died after a six-month bout with cancer. There I was with a five and a ten year old, as well as a mortgage, but at least I had a job that I loved. As a single parent in a family with two children, who were experiencing their own grief, and now only one income and without the benefits my family received from my wife's job, I felt stability, or at least the appearance of stability, was important for my children. I decided to avoid potentially risky decisions, such as changing my career.

When my sons got older, they worked while in high school and I took part time jobs. I made sure I provided what my children needed. They were active in extra curricular activities and paid for their own post secondary education. I had to do without certain things, including providing for my own future. I am confident I made the right decisions, at least most of the time, while raising them under trying circumstances. They have now become very successful in their own rights. To this day, twenty years later, people still tell me I did a great job raising my children. In my opinion, I just did what any loving parent would do. I give my kids all the credit for their successes.

In 2004 after 19 years surveying in Massachusetts, I applied for and was offered the position of General Construction Inspector with what was then, Mass Highway. I weighed the decision carefully. The new job meant taking a pay cut compared to my job

as a Survey Party Chief. I had no idea what promotions I might receive within the department. I still had a son in high school and my daily and monthly bills had not decreased.

However, the decision to accept the position made sense because of the benefits, since I had very few. I have heard many times from state employees that the reason they came to work for the state was not for the pay, because they most certainly could make more in the private sector, but for the benefits. I needed to start thinking of my own future and more importantly for when I retire.

I understood that as a retiree, I would not receive 80% of my salary as a pension, but combined with social security, I could probably make it work. I was also convinced to join because I was promised I would receive 100% of my medical benefits.

Now, if this proposed legislation is enacted, the conditions of my employment will not be the same as I agreed to when I was hired.

For my part, I can say this is dishonest. As taxpayers, we, like everyone else, are paying more and receiving fewer services. Yet once again, an unfair burden of the economic conditions in the Commonwealth is being put onto the backs of the public servants. We have already, in the past few years, given back pay raises that were fairly and collectively bargained and taken furloughs. Medical benefits have cost us more in the percentage of the premiums we pay and in new deductibles. I cannot say what course I might have taken had I not come to work for the Commonwealth. If I knew my retirement benefits would be so significantly curtailed, I certainly would have considered other options.

If I had been employed by MassDOT and its predecessors from the start, at my current age, 58, I would be two years shy of 30 years. As it is, I will have ten years of employment on October 31, 2014. When I turn 65, I will have fifteen years. I would eventually reach the proposed thirty years just a few months before I turn 80. This is in contrast to what would be almost fifty years of public service to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. When I was hired, I was told I would receive my full medical benefits when I reached retirement age.

It is time for you, our legislators, to do what is right. It is time to honor the agreements that we understood to be the conditions of our employment when we were hired. Shame on those of you who play with our livelihoods, who would change the rules when it is too late for us to change our future. I compare you to the Jeffrey Skillings, Ken Lays and Bernie Madoffs of the world, making conscious decisions that rob common people of the retirement they had every right to believe they would receive. And make no mistake about it, retiree health insurance is part of our retirement.

Thank you for understanding my past and considering my future.

Sincerely yours,



Michael Epstein
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