

October 2009

Suffolk County Government Effectively Eliminated

Sheriff's functions transferred to state but cost to Boston will stay the same

The Suffolk County Sheriff's Department, the last active component of Suffolk County government, will be transferred to state control as of January 2010 as a result of a new law signed by the Governor in August 2009. This act (Ch. 61, Acts of 2009) transfers the sheriffs' departments in the counties of Barnstable, Bristol, Dukes, Nantucket, Norfolk, Plymouth and Suffolk to the Commonwealth.

The employees in these seven sheriffs' departments will become state employees and will join the state Group Insurance Commission (GIC). Even with this transfer, the City of Boston's budget responsibility for Suffolk County will remain the same as in FY09 but will not increase.

Prior to the transfer, Boston paid a maintenance-of-effort charge as determined by the state budget process. In FY09, the City appropriated \$4.3M or 4% of the Suffolk County Sheriff's budget. Under the new law, the City will be assessed annually not more than \$4.3M to pay down the unfunded pension liability of the retirees of the Suffolk County Sheriff's Department who remain in the State-Boston Retirement System (SBRS). All active employees will be moved to the State Retirement System which will have a long-term benefit for Boston and the SBRS.

County government has historically been weaker in Massachusetts than in other states. Of the 14 counties in Massachusetts, 7 were abolished from 1997 to 2000 and their functions, including sheriffs' departments, were transferred to state control. In addition, Suffolk County retained its Sheriff's Department but its other functions were transferred to the state.

Chapter 61 transfers the seven remaining county sheriffs' departments to state control, ending the last active operation in Suffolk County government. The sheriffs of these counties supported the transfer since state control would provide more stable funding than available to counties, which rely on volatile deeds excise receipts for a share of their support.

The Registry of Deeds and other limited services will continue to be provided by the six remaining counties. Of the seven original counties abolished, a few have formed voluntary regional services. The former Franklin and Hampshire counties have formed Regional Councils of Government that provide services like cooperative purchasing, emergency preparedness and other regional services. Several communities in what was Essex County have instituted a regional police dispatch system.