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Public Policy Research

News Release

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Replacing police details on worksites with “flaggers” in Massachusetts would save taxpayers and consumers \$37 to \$67 million

BOSTON – Massachusetts could save \$37 million to \$67 million per year if it replaced police details on road projects with civilian flaggers. This is the conclusion of a just-released study by the Beacon Hill Institute at Suffolk University.

Massachusetts is the only state in which businesses, utilities or governmental entities conducting projects on local roads are generally required to use police details rather than civilian flaggers.

The police detail system is both unique and expensive. Critics argue that the practice of requiring police details inflates costs to businesses and taxpayers, while supporters argue that it improves public safety. Calls for reforms to the system have faced strong opposition from police departments. To date, however, no hard figures have been available to inform the issue, and both sides have relied heavily on anecdotal evidence.

The Beacon Hill Institute study used data from 103 police departments around the state to estimate the cost of police details to cities. The study did not consider details provided by state police officers.

Police officers in Massachusetts cities and towns earned an estimated \$141 million working off-duty details in 2003. Of this amount, an estimated \$93 million went for working traffic assignments.

Using data on property damage and bodily injury claims resulting from automobile accidents for 50 states, the Institute found that, contrary to the claims of their defenders, local police details do not improve traffic safety. In fact, Massachusetts has the worst accident rate in the nation, as measured by number of accidents causing property damage, and the second worst accident rate, as measured by number of accidents causing bodily injury.

“The evidence,” said Douglas Giuffre, a BHI economist who headed the study, refutes the claim that police details increase safety.” David G. Tuerck, Executive Director of the Institute, pointed to the study’s results as showing that “police details for traffic control have become an expensive entitlement whose elimination would save Bay Staters millions of dollars a year.”

The report is available at <http://www.beaconhill.org>.*

*The latest version of our study available on our website contains a small correction of the version posted on Thursday, November 11. The correction results from an overstatement of Walpole detail pay that appeared in the November 11 version. The Walpole Police Department had submitted a document in which the amount given for total expenses was substantially greater than actual 2003 expenses. Subsequent conversations with the Walpole police have permitted us to clarify this matter.