

COLUMN

Open the Massachusetts State House

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A HOOSIER AT HARVARD

I came to Massachusetts in the summer of 2020 as a bright-eyed, naive Hoosier hot off the heels of various state-level legislative involvements in my Midwestern home state of Indiana. I was excited about the prospects of attending a university located just 15 minutes away from the Bay State's Capitol Building, and was (perhaps quixotically) expecting that spirit of public service to be welcomed in kind by its elected officials.

It's no exaggeration to say that I primarily chose Harvard for its proximity to a U.S. state capital — it's just four stops away from the State House on the Red Line. I'd been involved in a legislative cause that was important to me back home in Indiana during high school, and through that work I had come to understand the importance of state-level legislation firsthand. I was soon convinced that Massachusetts, with a rich political culture centered around its state capital, was where I needed to be during my undergraduate years.

I still remember that fateful chilly morning in December 2019 when I walked into the Massachusetts State House's historic halls for the first time — Harvard admissions letter in hand. The now-infamous Boston Biogen conference was still more than two months away, and "Covid-19" had not yet entered the public lexicon. All I could feel was excitement at the idea of returning to the building relatively soon during college as part of my involvement in a quintessentially New England tradition: public service.

As you can imagine, things haven't exactly panned out that way. It's frustrating to admit that today, in 2022, it's been well over two years since I last visited the Capitol Building as an ordinary citizen wishing to exercise his constitutional right to petition. No member of the public has, actually — the Boston Globe previously reported in November that Massachusetts was the only state in the continental U.S. to have had its Capitol Building closed down for the entire duration of the Covid-19 pandemic. That still hasn't changed, three months later.

This literal lack of an open-door state government is incredibly concerning to me. Therefore, I write today to ask the leaders of this Commonwealth one thing: make the necessary accommodations to open the Massachusetts State House to the public as soon as possible.

As a Hoosier who is a quasi-resident of the Bay State by virtue of my status as a Harvard undergrad, my decision to move here was heavily informed by this region's centuries-long history with democratic reform and initiative. I know that many other students who've chosen to attend college in Boston in the hopes of pursuing a state-level legislative career (or in enacting legislative change themselves!) feel the same way. Still, while virtual public testimony, hearings, and internships are of some value, they're no substitute for the real thing. We college students have already lost two years of valuable in-person legislative experiences to the Capitol Hill lockdown; we shouldn't have to also lose the last two.

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When will the Bay State Capitol Building's prolonged period of closure finally come to an end? If those details are being discussed by state leadership right now, they haven't been keen to make them known publicly. In a recent article earlier this month, the House speaker did comment on potential vaccination mandates within the building, but he didn't provide an estimated date for a public opening. That lack of a clear timeline should be concerning to all members of our community — Harvard and non-Harvard alike — who value a transparent, open-door state government that works for them. Pre-Covid, your status as a constituent meant that you could show up to your elected official's office and talk to a staffer face-to-face. Today, all you can do is send an email or voicemail — and hope it doesn't get lost in the ether.

But even if one dismisses both the pedagogical value of in-person experiences for those engaged with public service and the accountability that in-person constituent-representative dialogue provides, the State House should still re-open even if only for its own sake. Clamoring for the re-opening of a government building isn't the weird (Beacon) Hill to die on that you might think; after all, anyone who's been in a capitol knows that there is something magical about being within an institution that exists only to serve the grand American experiment. The energy of collaborative democracy seems to permeate the air — indeed, I've spent many a day wandering the halls of the Indiana State House without a clear goal in mind, only to happen upon more interesting conversations or conferences than I can count. We all should be able to have similar experiences right here in the Bay State.

Indiana's State House has been up and running since last June. In fact, the tour office tells me that the building once again regularly sees school trips, tourist visits, and even weddings nearly every weekend (congrats to all the nuptials!). The 2022 Indiana legislative session more recently kicked off to great success as well, and open-door, transparent democracy remains well and alive in the Hoosier state. It's high time that Massachusetts re-committed itself to those values, too.

— Aldo D. Medina '24 is a History and Literature concentrator in Eliot House. His column "A Hoosier at Harvard" appears on alternate Fridays.