

A welcoming tone can help economy

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The ever wily House Speaker Tom Finneran (D-Mattapan) is first out of the gates on Beacon Hill with a plan to help jumpstart the economy. Good for him. Yes, \$110 million is peanuts in the bigger scheme of things, but the message sent to the business community is, to quote those MasterCard commercials, priceless.

Gov. Mitt Romney at first dismissed the notion that state government be involved in picking industry winners and losers. But as he has made the rounds of fellow governor confabs and CEO gatherings, Romney has probably gotten the picture that when it comes to the economy and state government, it's the tone, stupid.

There is not all that much state government can do to influence economic cycles beyond maintaining a stable tax and regulatory environment, but governors and legislatures can set a tone that is welcoming - or not - to business.

Finneran's plan draws money out of the tobacco trust fund - now brimming over at \$450 million - and spreads \$110 million around to business grant and loan programs.

And sure, the administrators of these state programs can all point to corporate success stories they aided along the way. But Rick Lord, head of Associated Industries of Massachusetts, wasn't grinning ear to ear at the Finneran press conference because he thought the \$110 million would make or break his member companies.

But rather, the initiative was likely a welcome change from AIM's normal posture of attempting to kill anti-competitive business measures and higher taxes.

Not all of Finneran's plan is equally praiseworthy. Adding an ombudsman to shepherd project permits through state bureaucracy sends the message that it's just one person's job to make permitting less of a headache for business. That should be the mindset of all agency personnel under Commonwealth Development Chief Doug Foy.

Romney is about to embark on his own economic development policy tour. Having the legislative and executive branches playing a game of "I'll see your pro-business agenda and raise you one" is a dream come true for a business community all too practiced in playing defense.