

State Senator MARY JO WHITE



Reports to You

21ST DISTRICT • WINTER 2008

A MESSAGE FROM SENATOR MARY JO WHITE

It is a snowy shut-in kind of day. The office is quiet and it is a good opportunity to write a year-in-review letter—sort of like the Christmas letters that you get from friends bringing you up to date on new arrivals and happenings.

We'll start with the 2007-08 budget. It wasn't pretty and it wasn't on time but it successfully held the line on taxes. None of the Governor's proposed \$2.5 billion in tax increases passed. With a surplus of over \$300 million he simply could not make the case for new fees and taxes.

In the district the hot topic has been the proposed tolling of Interstate 80. This was included in the budget negotiations and was enacted with no analysis of economic impact or traffic diversion in the corridor. Fortunately, the Federal Highway Administration must approve the deal and they have indicated that the application is deficient in several key respects. They are asking all the right questions and I am hopeful that this misguided plan, which I voted against, can be reversed. Thanks to the Clarion Chamber of Commerce for taking a lead role in opposing this plan.

We certainly have road and transportation infrastructure needs, but if the federal government allows every cash-strapped state to toll its interstates it would have a devastating effect on the flow of goods across this country.

When you are on Rt. 6 near the Warren County Visitors Center, stop and see the monument to the Conservation Corps and learn about its interesting history. During the Depression, thousands of young men participated in one of the largest public works projects in our history, much of which took place

in our national parks and forests here and out west. Former members attended the dedication and told stories of their adventures. Thanks to the Atwood family for spearheading the effort.

This Veterans Day, Slippery Rock High School student council organized a school-wide assembly honoring area veterans of all recent wars and conflicts. About 80 vets and their families attended the celebration and luncheon. It was a heartwarming tribute and the kids are to be congratulated for a job well done. The holidays are an especially difficult time for families with loved ones serving in the military. The best Christmas present I ever received was when my husband came home from Vietnam on Christmas Day, 1968.

Our beautiful Capitol celebrated its 100th year with a host of centennial events. This impressive building is a reflection of our culture, art and history. It is truly the people's palace. If the opportunity presents itself, bring the family and take a tour.

As we return to session we have some serious work to do on the energy bills. In addition to winding up the special session dealing with fuels and funding, we must address the looming increase in electricity prices. As the rate caps expire, businesses and individuals can expect rate hikes. The challenge will be to work with providers to minimize the spikes. Conservation and improved energy efficiency will have to be part of the solution.

All the best to you and yours in 2008.

Mary Jo

New Rules Open Up Senate Activity

One of the state Senate's first official acts of the 2007-08 legislative session was to adopt seven reform proposals designed to make the legislative process more open and accessible to the public.

To prevent late-night votes, voting session is now limited to the hours between 8 a.m. and 11 p.m.

The Senate is now required to wait at least six hours before voting on an amended bill or a conference committee report, and amendments are posted to the Internet before being offered on the Senate floor. This gives legislators and the public time to understand changes in a bill before it comes up for vote.

An updated fiscal note is now prepared if a bill is amended after consideration by the Senate Appropriations Committee and if the amendment is expected to have a financial impact.



The 2007-08 Dairy Princess is Lyndsey Rebecca Royek from Erie County. In addition to showing cows, she is an active and successful student at Corry High School. I recently introduced her in the Senate and was very proud of this talented young lady. She presided during the Farm Show in January and plans to study marketing at Penn State.

State Budget: Tax Hikes Prevented, Spending Curtailed

It took too long to get it done, but the General Assembly and Gov. Rendell enacted a state budget that funds necessary programs. The Legislature rejected the more than \$2.5 billion in tax increases sought by the administration.

All of Gov. Rendell's seven proposed tax increases were rejected, including a sales tax hike, an electricity tax, a health plan tax, and a tax on trash collection. In addition, legislators insisted that more than \$300

million in available funds be set aside in the Rainy Day Fund in the event of unforeseen fiscal issues in 2007-08.

While the administration sought to link passage of the budget to the approval of Gov. Rendell's energy legislative package, we successfully argued that the issues should be considered separately.

The \$27.178 billion spending plan represents a modest 3.3 percent increase over the final 2006-07 budget. In addition, \$317.5 million of fund-

ing for mass transit was moved into a dedicated fund. If you include this amount in the spending level, the total is \$27.5 billion, which represents a growth rate of 4.5 percent over the final 2006-07 budget.

It's a good start on controlling state spending – we've slowed it from previous years under Gov. Rendell and it's lower than the national average – but it is clear that we have more work to do.

Reform: Senate Votes, Live Session Video, PA Laws Now Online

Senate votes, debates, consolidated statutes and live video of floor activity can be accessed online, part of the ongoing commitment to make state government more open and accountable to citizens.

The general public can read bills and amendments, review text of floor debates, and see how senators voted. Informa-

tion is available for votes in committee and the full Senate.

Citizens can also track who is lobbying, who individual lobbyists are representing, and how they are spending their money. They can also see the number of clients each lobbyist has and what each one is spending per client.

Check it out at www.pasen.gov.



Senate Roll Calls by Date	
Select a Session Day	
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Preserving History

I visited the state's rare book collection before it was relocated to its beautiful (and climate-controlled) new quarters in the State Library. My tour was conducted by Caryn Carr, the state librarian. Much of the collection was purchased by Benjamin Franklin and it has miraculously survived fires and wars. What was just as serious a threat was light and humidity. The collection, which includes a work published in 1493 chronicling the history of the world beginning with Genesis, is now housed in a state-of-the-art vault.

What I found particularly fascinating is the state's vast collection of newspapers dating back to early colonial days. We actually have a paper copy of Franklin's newspaper describing his experiment with electricity. Remember the kite and the key in the thunderstorm? These newspapers are living history and like the books are endangered. They have survived this long because many of them are made from rags instead of wood pulp. I am looking for a donor to help preserve and digitize the collection. If you have an extra million or so lying about, give me a call!

How to View Senate Votes

There are three ways to find and view bills, as well as how legislators voted: by bill number, keyword or date. They are listed on the official Pennsylvania State Senate website (www.pasen.gov).

HOW TO VIEW DEBATE TRANSCRIPTS

To read transcripts of debates and other activity from the floor of the Senate, go to www.pasen.gov and click on Senate Legislative Journals, which are posted by date. (Journals are posted upon Senate approval or within 45 days, whichever is earlier.)

HOW TO VIEW LOBBYIST DISCLOSURE REPORTS

A list of lobbyists and related information are posted at www.pasen.gov under "Topics of Special Interest."

Here, you'll find links to Department of State Lobbying Disclosure information, as well as a list of Lobbyist Expenditures, which lists activity according to lobbyists, the organizations they represent, policy areas and quarterly totals.

Under Act 134 of 2006, the Department of State must update the list by May 1 of each odd-numbered year. Random audits will be conducted on the registrations every two years.

New Law Protects Landowners from Liability

Pennsylvania landowners have been traditionally generous when it comes to allowing hunters and recreational users on their property.

When that practice was threatened because of an unpopular court decision, the Legislature responded with Act 11 of 2007, which protects the innocent landowner from civil liability for injuries caused by a third party. The injured party can still seek damages from the person who actually inflicted the harm.



White Selected to Chair Senate Special Session Committee on Energy

On September 24th, Governor Rendell kicked off a Special Session on Energy with an address to the General Assembly. A special session runs concurrent with the legislature's regular session, but provides an added focus on specific legislative initiatives.

The Governor's proclamation sets the parameters for the special session – ways to encourage new investment in alternative and renewable energy, and diversify our fuel supply through the development of a biofuels industry in the Commonwealth.

I was pleased to be named chairman of the Senate Special Session Committee on Energy Policies. The Special Session Committee has held public hearings and meetings, and advanced several important bills to the full Senate for consideration. In mid-December, the Senate passed two key bills which I sponsored: Special Session SB 1, which provides \$650 million over ten years in new funding for alternative and renewable energy projects, and Special Session SB 36, which pro-

vides incentives and establishes benchmarks for the biodiesel produced in Pennsylvania. I'm proud to say we passed these bills with strong, bipartisan support and without any new taxes.

I invite you to share your ideas with me on these subjects as the Special Session continues in 2008. You can also stay updated by following the activities of the Special Session Committee online at www.senatormjwhite.com (choose 'Special Session on Energy').

Legislature Passes Hazardous Sites Cleanup Funding

The Hazardous Sites Cleanup Act program (HSCA) is the Department of Environmental Protection's most important tool to respond when toxic chemicals or hazardous substances are spilled, leaked or otherwise found in the environment. Recently HSCA has survived on available balances and transfers from Growing Greener money. Governor Rendell proposed an increased

municipal waste tax to support the fund but this plan was rejected by the Senate. A compromise, which would fund HSCA for the next four years using available legislative accounts and money from the existing Capital Stock and Franchise Tax, was approved by both houses before recess and was signed into law by the Governor.

New Law Boosts Solar Energy

The General Assembly recently passed a new law that ensures Pennsylvania remains a leader in the development of solar energy and other alternative energy.

Once Act 35 of 2007 is fully phased in, Pennsylvania utilities will need to purchase 0.5 percent of their electricity from solar energy. A half-percent may not sound like a lot, but it's realistic, and it's much more than what is currently required.



Senator White hosted her annual Student Government Seminar at Clarion University-Venango in October. Senator White, Attorney General Tom Corbett (center) and Rep. Scott Hutchinson worked with students who took part in exercises demonstrating how legislation is developed and passed.

Reducing Infections in Health Care Facilities

Under Act 52 of 2007, sponsored by Senator Ted Erickson (R-26), Pennsylvania hospitals, nursing homes, and ambulatory surgical facilities will be the first in the nation to report infections to the National Healthcare Safety Network, an Internet-based surveillance system operated by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. A recent Wall Street Journal article applauded Pennsylvania's efforts to track and ultimately reduce the incidence of health care-associated infections (HAIs).

HAIs affect an estimated two million Americans each year, with more than 100,000 dying from bacteria that are increasingly resistant to common antibiotics. Infections picked up in hospitals and other health care facili-

ties add more than \$8,000 to the cost of the average hospital stay and complicate medical conditions.

Health care facilities must have their electronic or surveillance tracking systems in place by the end of 2008.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Here are some tips from the Mayo Clinic on what you can do to protect yourself, family members or friends from health care-associated infections:

- Ask all hospital and other medical staff to wash their hands before touching you – every time.
- Wash your own hands frequently.
- Ask to be bathed with disposable cloths treated with a disinfectant rather than with soap and water.
- Make sure that intravenous tubes and catheters are inserted and removed under sterile conditions. Some hospitals have dramatically reduced blood infections simply by sterilizing patients' skin before using catheters.
- Always complete the full regimen of antibiotics prescribed to you. HAIs are often introduced when a patient arrives at a hospital with an inadequately treated infection.

Can You Access High-Speed Internet?

One of the things you will notice about this newsletter is the number of times we refer you to websites. This is now how most Americans get information.

I continue to be frustrated at the slow pace at which affordable high-speed Internet is made available in rural communities in Pennsylvania. The 2004 law required telecommunications companies to make it available to all customers by 2015. In hindsight, that was too long; we may



be communicating with brain waves by then.

One little-known feature of the law is the Bona Fide

Retail Request (BFRR) program. Customers of Verizon, Embarq PA or Windstream can speed up the process by submitting a request. When the company receives applications for high-speed Internet service from 50 telephone lines or 25 percent of the lines in a Carrying Service Area, whichever is less, the company must accelerate access. You can reach your

company's website through this state site: www.newpa.com/broadband. You may have to go to the public library to do it.

Major Changes for "EMS Tax"

Act 7 of 2007 is a major overhaul of the \$52-a-year Emergency and Municipal Services Tax.

It ends the lump sum payment and requires that the tax be withheld on a payroll-period basis with a maximum deduction of \$1 per week. Employers will remit the collections quarterly. Persons earning

less than \$12,000 annually will be exempt from the tax.

Municipalities must use at least 25 percent of the revenue for emergency services, including police and fire. Remaining revenues can be used for road construction and maintenance, and property tax relief.

Spending Limits Move Forward

The Senate Finance Committee approved the Taxpayer Protection Act bill and Constitutional Amendment, designed to rein in state government spending.

Senate Bill 7 is a proposed amendment to the Pennsylvania State Constitution that would limit state spending to the average inflation rate plus the average percentage change in state population over the three preceding years. Senate Bill 707 would provide the same limitation, but not as a Constitutional Amendment.

To prevent the state from pushing spending requirements onto local taxpayers, the measures were amended to

include a provision stating that the spending limit would be decreased when funds are cut to a mandated service.

In addition to the spending limits in the Taxpayer Protection Act, the proposal also sets realistic restrictions on the use of any unanticipated revenues received by the Commonwealth. Specifically, 75 percent of any revenues exceeding the spending limits imposed by the bill would be returned to taxpayers. The remaining 25 percent would go directly into the Rainy Day Fund to help address unanticipated revenue shortfalls.



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