



# YOUR REPORT

from State Representative

# ROBERT FREEMAN

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## Freeman supports expansion of Property Tax/Rent Rebate Program

A new law prime-sponsored by state Rep. Steve Samuelson and co-sponsored by state Rep. Robert Freeman expands the Property Tax/Rent Rebate Program to benefit hundreds of thousands of Pennsylvanians.

“This change increases income eligibility limits, provides larger rebates for those who qualify, and includes a cost-of-living adjustment so that recipients won’t lose their rebate in the future when they get modest increases in their Social Security,” said Freeman, D-Northampton.

The new law increases the income limits for the Property Tax/Rent Rebate Program to \$45,000 for homeowners and renters. The previous limits were \$35,000 for homeowners and \$15,000 for renters. Only

half of an applicant’s Social Security income is counted when determining eligibility.

It also increases the maximum rebate to \$1,000 from the previous \$650.

The bipartisan legislation increases income limits for the program for the first time since January 2007.

“An additional 175,000 eligible Pennsylvanians could participate in the expanded Property Tax/Rent Rebate Program,” Freeman noted. “Hundreds of thousands of current recipients will no longer lose their eligibility due to annual cost of living adjustments in

*continued on page 2...*

## House passes Freeman bill to extend Main St. participation

The House of Representatives passed legislation that would allow communities to extend their participation in the state’s Main Street program for up to a total of 10 years, according to the bill’s author Rep. Robert Freeman.

“A community’s Main Street initiative often just gets started with implementing its revitalization plan when the funding ends, undermining the ability to realize the plan’s objectives. With the addition of this needed option of a program extension, communities would be better positioned to fully succeed in their objectives for

revitalization and enhancements to downtown commercial areas,” said Freeman.

House Bill 450, which passed the House on June 6, 2023 by a vote of 166-37, awaits action by the state Senate. It would give the state Department of Community and Economic Development authority to grant a period of up to an additional five years for administrative costs associated with employing a Main Street manager if it determines that it would be beneficial to the community in reaching its revitalization goals.

*continued on page 2...*

## Freeman land bank legislation OK’d by House

All municipalities, regardless of population size, would be able to establish land banks, under legislation sponsored by Rep. Robert Freeman that passed the state House of Representatives.

“Land banks are a transformative resource that promote affected neighborhoods and business districts to be revitalized. We should be doing everything we can as a state to encourage economic development and improve the quality of life in all municipalities, big and small,” Freeman said.

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**Property Tax/Rent Rebate** *continued from page 1...*  
their Social Security. And all those who receive their rebate will receive an increase from what they received last year.”

The Property Tax/Rent Rebate Program provides a state rebate on property taxes and rent to income-eligible residents who are 65 or older; widows and widowers 50 or older; and people with disabilities 18 or older.

He said his district office is available to help people with their application by appointment. The office is located at 215 Northampton St. in Easton and the phone number is 610-253-5543.

The Property Tax/Rent Rebate Program, supported by the Pennsylvania Lottery, began in 1971 to benefit older adults and adults with disabilities.

### **Eligibility Table for Homeowners and Renters**

**More people eligible, more money back!**

Homeowner income	Previous rebate	New Rebate in 2024
Up to \$8,000	\$650	\$1,000
Up to \$15,000	\$500	\$770
Up to \$18,000	\$300	\$460
Up to \$35,000	\$250	\$380
Up to \$45,000	\$0	\$380
<b>Renter income</b>		
Up to \$8,000	\$650	\$1,000
Up to \$15,000	\$500	\$770
Up to \$18,000	\$0	\$460
Up to \$45,000	\$0	\$380

## **Freeman proposal would let housing authorities set up police departments**

State Rep. Robert Freeman has reintroduced a bill that would let public housing authorities in cities of the third class form their own police force.

“Philadelphia and Allegheny County housing authorities already have this ability under current law, but smaller cities in the state often face some of the same problems with criminal activity that larger cities do,” Freeman said. “Public housing authorities should have the ability to set up their own police force in order to better combat crime.

“A public housing police force would also greatly enhance community policing efforts, making public housing projects safer for their residents and their families, especially children and the elderly.”

Under Freeman’s bill (H.B. 1726), housing authority police officers would look after public safety concerns in public housing projects, with the ability to call on municipal police for assistance as needed. They would be required to complete the same course of instruction and accreditation as is required for municipal police officers under state law. Funding for these police forces would come from public housing authority budgets.

While every housing authority would have the option to form a police force under Freeman’s bill, they would not be required to do so.

“Some authorities may choose to simply hire a detective rather than create a full-blown police force,” Freeman said. “Either way, they could determine what would be the most appropriate approach to enhancing law enforcement efforts and better overall public safety.”

Besides reducing crime and enhancing public safety, Freeman said his bill would also provide a benefit for municipal police departments by providing more officers in certain communities where law enforcement resources are spread thin.

House Bill 1726 was referred to the House Housing and Community Development Committee for consideration.

“One of the legacies of Urban Renewal was the building of public housing in what are often isolated locations. My bill aims to provide greater public safety in secluded areas where the elderly and those of modest means are often housed and where they can be more vulnerable to safety concerns,” Freeman said.

Recent articles have appeared in local newspapers highlighting the safety concerns of elderly residents in some of Easton’s public housing.

### **Main Street extension** *continued from page 1...*

“My proposal would give the department the authority to determine whether added time by a community in the program would make all the difference in ensuring that the plan is fully implemented, and the revitalization objectives are met,” Freeman said.

The Main Street Act was created to provide grants for commercial downtown revitalization efforts, including infrastructure improvements, marketing and promoting the established commercial downtown within the Main Street area, and façade grants, all under the direction of a Main Street manager. Currently, participation is limited to a five-year period.

Freeman said Easton’s successful Main Street Program, which became nationally accredited in 2007, has been recognized with various awards from the Pennsylvania Downtown Center, the city of Easton, Lafayette College, Lehigh Valley Economic Development Corp., Pennsylvania Pursuits magazine, and the Chamber of Commerce and was declared the No. 1 performing Main Street Program in Pennsylvania four times.

Freeman authored the state Elm Street law which was signed in Easton on Feb. 9, 2004. Elm Street applies the same type of revitalization strategies as Main Street to residential neighborhoods. Easton’s West Ward neighborhood has been a recipient of Elm Street grants and programing.

### **Land bank legislation** *continued from page 1...*

Land banks are governmental entities that specialize in the conversion of vacant, abandoned, and foreclosed properties into productive reuse which helps to mitigate blight by acquiring, maintaining, and redeveloping derelict properties.

Currently, state law only allows municipalities with 10,000 residents or more to create land banks, leaving smaller municipalities without access to resources that are critical for addressing blight. Freeman said the General Assembly passed a law in the 2019-20 session that allows municipalities of all population sizes to establish redevelopment authorities.

“Building on that important change, we should now take the same step with land banks,” Freeman said. “In many respects, they are an even more important tool for smaller communities that have seen their main street commercial districts atrophy and residential properties decline as the community continues to lose population.”

Freeman said the Pennsylvania State Association of Boroughs has strongly advocated for the measure.

House Bill 1207 awaits action by the state Senate.

## Promoting redevelopment of vacant factory buildings

New state tax incentives would be created to promote redevelopment and reuse of abandoned or neglected factory or mill buildings in Pennsylvania under legislation authored by state Rep. Robert Freeman.

“Using a building for the purpose other than what it was originally intended for is a way to reuse buildings that have stood in our communities for decades. Some of the buildings have been around for more than 100 years. They might be neglected, but they are often solid structures that are ideal for adaptive reuse,” Freeman said. “My bill would provide an incentive to breathe new life into these buildings – many of which are part of a community’s heritage and identity.

“Repurposing an old factory or mill for retail, office or arts space, or transforming them into dwellings, encourages economic development and improves the quality of life of a community.”

Freeman’s legislation (H.B. 653), which awaits action by the House Finance Committee, would establish three types of tax incentive programs:

- A 25% tax credit for the rehabilitation and reconstruction costs incurred by the owner.
- A business tax credit equal to the salaries and wages paid to full-time employees, up to a maximum of \$7,000 per employee.
- An interest income tax credit of 15% on the interest from loans for the expenditures within the building. The limit would be up to \$12,000 per taxable year. The loan holder would also be eligible for a 100% tax credit, up to \$25,000 per taxable year, on interest from loans for substantial rehabilitation.

Freeman said adaptive reuse isn’t a new concept and has been successfully applied in revitalization efforts in many communities. He pointed to the number of old industrial buildings around the Lehigh Valley that have been repurposed. The Silk Mill on North 13th Street in Easton is one example of adaptive reuse of an old factory complex that has proven to be a great success.



*Rep. Freeman with Lafayette College students and administrators on a visit to the Capitol Building last year.*

## Freeman proposed tutoring program to be available for all PA public schools advances

In order to improve academic performance in Pennsylvania’s public schools, state Rep. Robert Freeman introduced legislation (H.B. 100) that would provide high school juniors and seniors with academic credit for tutoring students in lower grades.

“This proposal is a win-win situation for the students serving as tutors, as well as the students receiving the tutoring. The students receiving the tutoring would get the extra attention they need to improve their academic performance. Tutoring can also help to put students in charge of their own learning process as they pass that knowledge onto other students. It can lead to better study habits, improve academic performance, and boost self-esteem among those doing the tutoring. Students in lower grades are typically more receptive to learning from a high school student who would serve as a mentor,” Freeman said.

Freeman said his legislation is not a state mandate; rather, it is a program public school entities can choose to utilize at little or no cost to taxpayers. It would require the state Department of Education to establish tutoring program guidelines, which would provide academic credit to students in 11th and 12th grades for tutoring students in lower grades.

Freeman said Pennsylvania is currently experiencing a considerable teacher shortage and it’s possible that his tutoring proposal may encourage students to consider going into teaching after their experience as a tutor.

House Bill 100 passed the House on May 2, 2023 by a vote of 141-60 and was referred to the Senate Education Committee, which reported it to the full Senate for consideration on June 6.

## Freeman proposes public health insurance option

Permitting the State Workers’ Insurance Fund to sell health insurance would give Pennsylvanians another more affordable insurance option, according to state Rep. Robert Freeman.

The State Workers’ Insurance Fund within the Department of Labor and Industry was established to provide a workers’ compensation program for Pennsylvania businesses that could not access workers’ compensation insurance in the private sector. It is currently permitted to sell workers’ compensation insurance only. Freeman’s bill (H.B. 658) would expand SWIF offerings to include health insurance, which individuals or businesses could purchase for their employees.

“By allowing SWIF to offer health insurance as a public option, it would make a quality insurance product available to Pennsylvanians at a lower cost than current private insurance rates because of its

lower administrative overhead. A public option would also create more competition within the health insurance market to help drive rates down,” Freeman said. “In addition, by making this available in the market, it would serve as a yardstick by which to measure the fairness of rates charged by private health insurance companies.

“Health insurance rates continue to rise. My proposal would bring health care policies back to an affordable range for the average Pennsylvanian. It would also offer a less costly alternative to the current private health insurance plans available today.”

Freeman said there would be no tax dollars used to subsidize the public option because the offering would be funded with premiums paid by health insurance subscribers and a possible loan from SWIF if needed, which would be paid back.

House Bill 658 was referred to the House Insurance Committee.

## Freeman plan would provide property tax relief and fairness

It's no secret that Pennsylvanians are looking for relief from rising property taxes, and state Rep. Robert Freeman is offering a proposal to address that concern.

"It seems that nearly every year, property taxes go up and the bills get more difficult to pay for many families and especially older Pennsylvanians on a fixed income who are struggling to stay in their homes," Freeman said. "My proposal would offer Pennsylvania homeowners needed property tax relief and build fairness into the property tax system by capping property taxes to reflect household income."

Freeman's H.B. 656 would amend the state constitution to allow property tax circuit breakers to be used in Pennsylvania.

"A property tax circuit breaker is quite simple: it would protect taxpayers from a property tax overload just like an electric circuit breaker prevents an electrical overload. Specifically, it would exempt homeowners from having to pay that portion of their property tax bill that exceeds a certain set percentage of their household income," Freeman said.

"A property tax circuit breaker would help stabilize neighborhoods and communities across the commonwealth and provide much needed tax relief to households on fixed or limited incomes."

In Pennsylvania, a proposed constitutional amendment must pass the General Assembly in two consecutive legislative sessions before being placed on the ballot to be considered by the state's voters. If the Pennsylvania electorate approves the proposal, Freeman said enabling legislation would need to be passed by the General Assembly and signed by the governor to institute property tax circuit breakers and to set the percentage threshold amount of property tax to household income that would trigger the circuit breaker.

House Bill 656 was referred to the House Finance Committee.



*Rep. Freeman in the House chamber with Chris Strehl and Natalie Winters who interned in his district office in 2023.*

## Freeman bill would compensate communities with high percentage of tax-exempt properties

The state would provide special financial assistance to municipalities with high levels of tax-exempt property, such as institutions of higher learning, nonprofit medical facilities, government offices or state forests and game lands, under legislation introduced by state Rep. Robert Freeman.

"Municipalities in the Lehigh Valley and across Pennsylvania with a large amount of tax-exempt properties are faced with the challenge of providing residents with essential services but without a sustaining real estate tax revenue base," Freeman said. "My legislation would provide annual financial assistance to those affected municipalities, giving them the ability to provide those services that ensure the health and safety of their residents, and it would put their community in a more stable financial position to attract economic development and succeed."

Freeman said H.B. 451 would establish the Tax-Exempt Property Municipal Assistance Fund to help municipalities with 15% or more of their total assessed property value as tax-exempt property within their borders. It would be funded by the state's existing 18% Liquor Tax, known as the Johnstown Flood Tax that generates over \$500 million annually.

"Many of the tax-exempt properties in our communities are significant employers and are important regional assets but being tax exempt means they do not pay real estate taxes to their host municipality. That puts an undue burden on residential property owners in those communities who must pick up the slack," Freeman said. "A high percentage of tax-exempt properties within a municipality's borders leaves the affected community with a greatly diminished tax base, which in turn makes it difficult to provide essential services. My proposal would provide the financial compensation necessary to put these high tax-exempt property municipalities on a sounder financial footing to ensure their stability and success as a community."

"The liquor tax helped to rebuild Johnstown after it was devastated by a flood in 1936," Freeman said. "It's time to target that money to municipalities that are falling further into financial distress simply because they have significant amounts of tax-exempt properties within their boundaries. This legislation can help hundreds of communities across our commonwealth, including those municipalities that are under the Act 47 Financially Distressed Municipalities program, college towns, county seats and municipalities that host nonprofit hospitals, as they have a high percentage of tax-exempt property."

In the Lehigh Valley, the legislation would provide significant funding to Allentown, Bethlehem, Easton, Fountain Hill and other municipalities with high percentages of tax-exempt properties.

The legislation would require each county to annually provide the state with information regarding the assessed value of tax-exempt properties. The funding formula would be based on the assessed value of those properties as if they were taxable. No municipality would receive more than 10% of the total revenue in the fund, and property owned by the municipality itself would not be eligible for compensation.

House Bill 451 is currently in the House Local Government Committee.

## Personal Notes...

### Stalemate on the Susquehanna



*Dear Friends,*

*The state budget is the most significant policy document passed by the Pennsylvania General Assembly every year. It appropriates funding to the various departments of state government and the programs that those departments oversee, allocating resources to recurring essential programs, as well as new program initiatives that respond to the policy priorities of the day.*

*This year's budget became mired in partisan stalemate over policy differences and competing priorities that were, in part, the result of divided government as a Republican-controlled Senate and a Democratic-controlled House differed on policy, spending priorities, and programs. A budget was passed on July 5, 2023. However, a sticking point occurred over a line item the Senate had inserted that would have established a school voucher program to send tax dollars to private schools, funding that otherwise could be used to fund public education. I, like my fellow House Democrats, opposed the voucher proposal and insisted on providing much needed funding to public education. Governor Shapiro said he would line-item veto the voucher proposal from the budget. The Speaker of the House signed the budget bill on July 5th but Senate Republican leadership, in protest over the planned line-item veto, refused to call the Senate back into*

*session to sign the bill as is required by the constitution. This delayed the budget's implementation. Finally, on August 3rd the Senate acquiesced and reconvened so that the budget bill could be signed and sent to the Governor, which he signed into law, but vetoed the voucher proposal.*

*This drawn-out process became worse as the Senate refused to pass the various code bills that are required to drive funding out for certain line items such as community colleges and public libraries. It was not until mid-December that the stalemate ended, and the various bills and other required pieces of legislation for the budget agreement were passed in a flurry of votes. The Education Code bill passed allowing the distribution of funds to community colleges, libraries, school building repairs, and other important education programs, although the Senate blocked the funding for the House-proposed Level Up Funding to provide needed assistance to poorer school districts. The Fiscal Code also passed, releasing funds to a number of critical initiatives held up by the budget impasse and establishing a Child and Dependent Care Enhancement Tax Credit Program, increasing the credit amount that Pennsylvania taxpayers can claim from the current 30% to 100%. Nearly a quarter of a million working families will see their tax credits for such care more than triple with more money back for childcare and dependent care expenses,*

*making sure family members incapable of taking care of themselves have safe and reliable care.*

*The Pennsylvania legislature has long been very partisan but in the past there was a greater understanding that, at the end of the day, things, like budgets, needed to get done and compromises reached on how to get there. While some would argue that's what happened in the end this year, the current political climate in our nation makes pragmatism in governance a tougher objective to reach. The divisiveness in the political process has become more acute with deep seated ideological differences between parties often getting in the way of reaching worthy objectives for the common good. Hopefully, the lessons learned in this year's budget process and the understanding that better communication and collaboration between parties can lead to less posturing and more pragmatic policy making would be good lessons to learn and to the betterment of all.*

*Sincerely,*

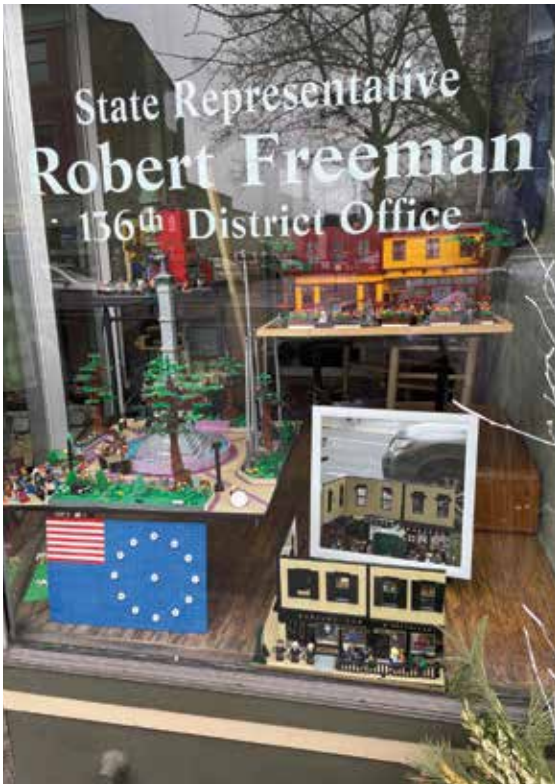
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*Rep. Freeman's district office at 215 Northampton St. in Easton currently has a display of Lego scenes of Centre Square and local businesses in Easton's downtown and West Ward. The displays are the work of Jeremy Joseph, director of the Big Easy Easton Brass band that performs on various occasions in Easton.*