

STATE REPRESENTATIVE

Bob Merski

REPORT TO THE PEOPLE

OF THE 2ND LEGISLATIVE DISTRICT



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DEAR NEIGHBOR,

The past year and a half have been difficult for all of us. For me personally, it was the most difficult time I've ever experienced as an elected official. Every decision was met with anger. Every decision made could hurt someone. If the decision was restrictive to stop the spread of COVID-19, businesses suffered. If the decision was too loose, people got sick, and many died. There were no decisions that didn't hurt someone.

But now, we have the potential for a smoother path forward.

As I write this, 80% of Pennsylvanians 18 or older have received their first dose of COVID-19 vaccine. As vaccinations continue, we can see glimpses of pre-pandemic life returning to our community.

In Erie County, however, we are below the state vaccination rate, with only about 50% of residents having at least one dose. As a result, COVID-19 cases are on the rise locally, due to unvaccinated people spreading the disease to others. This jeopardizes our progress and puts the entire community at risk for another spike in cases.

We have the power to change that and put COVID-19 behind us once and for all.

The evidence is clear; the COVID-19 vaccine is safe and effective. In our own community, local doctors and health care workers who received the initial doses almost 10 months ago are still on the job working to keep you healthy. Vaccines are widely available and are free to everyone 12 or older.

I truly believe this is the greatest country in the world, and our scientists – armed with decades of research – worked brilliantly to develop safe and effective vaccines. Together, by rolling up our sleeves, we can be a leader in beating back COVID-19. Let's all do our part to keep ourselves, and the people we love, from getting sick by getting vaccinated.

To find a vaccination site, visit www.health.pa.gov and click on the "COVID-19 Vaccine" link at the top of the page.

Bob Merski



At the January unveiling of LECOM Health's new Mobile COVID-19 Vaccination Clinic.

REAL ID enforcement postponed to May 2023

The start date for REAL ID enforcement – when heightened ID requirements will go into effect for taking domestic commercial flights and entering military bases and certain other high-security federal facilities – has been postponed until **May 3, 2023**.



Getting a REAL ID is purely optional. Nevertheless, if you fly frequently and enjoy the convenience of using your state driver license as identification, you may want to consider upgrading to a REAL ID. Visit www.penndot.gov/REALID to learn more.

MY COMMITTEES

INSURANCE • GAMING OVERSIGHT
GAME AND FISHERIES • URBAN AFFAIRS

My bills to boost businesses, benefit residents

Like the rest of the state, Erie is still feeling the economic impacts of the pandemic. To help speed recovery for local families, small businesses and municipal government, I have introduced bills that would:

- ✓ **Replenish PA's breweries, wineries and distilleries.** They employ thousands and contribute billions annually to the state economy, but many are not eligible for relief under the recently enacted hospitality industry relief program. My bill would create a grant program to provide a funding lifeline.
- ✓ **Build back our hard-hit fitness industry.** Local gyms, spas and fitness/dance studios were subject to extended closure orders and were among the hardest hit by the pandemic. My bill would create a grant program to help these important businesses get back on their feet and moving again.
- ✓ **Ensure more seniors and those on fixed incomes qualify for a Property Tax/Rent Rebate.** Cost-of-living adjustments can disqualify those living on fixed incomes who need this critical assistance. My bill would amend the definition of "income" under the Taxpayer Relief Act to exclude COLA increases and ensure residents in need remain eligible.
- ✓ **Help local police departments afford vehicles.** With the pandemic straining budgets and the price of new cruisers an obstacle for many departments, my bill would provide an affordable option by allowing them to purchase used police pursuit vehicles at fixed prices before the state sells them at public auction. The bill is currently being considered in the House.
- ✓ **Expand tax savings for military families.** Our state tax code exempts service members from paying taxes on income earned for their military service while on active duty inside or outside the state. But those exemptions don't apply to non-military husbands and wives who live with their active-duty spouses while they are deployed outside PA. My legislation would extend the exemption to these non-military spouses who often face hardships during this time.

Addressing PA's public pension funding crisis

Pennsylvania is facing a public pension funding crisis because the state's two largest systems – the State Employees' Retirement System and the Public-School Employees' Retirement Systems – do not have enough money to fully fund all members. Beyond affecting public employees, the shortfall has the potential to burden taxpayers.

In past years, the state has intermittently allowed these pension holders to retire early with no reduction in benefits. This option has been considered a possible cost-saving measure, but the benefits and drawbacks have not been adequately studied.

I recently introduced a resolution directing the budget committee to study the fiscal consequences of the early retirement option to determine whether it would be an effective way to address the shortfall.

Prepping teachers for the future

While the pandemic highlighted the importance of having access to remote instruction, it is also becoming clear that these tools may be useful in broader situations, to provide a more inclusive learning environment for students who are unable to attend class.

I recently joined my colleague state Rep. Dan Miller to introduce legislation that would make online learning and remote education training part of teachers' continuing professional education requirements.

Right: Discussing the Erie Fire Department's new alert system, which was funded by a \$100,000 grant.

Below: Welcome Eddie Williams to our staff! Eddie comes to us from Mercyhurst University, where he is finishing his bachelor's degree in management. Eddie also serves in the PA National Guard. He's excited to join our team and serve the people of the 2nd Legislative District.



Around the District



Left: With Mabel Howard in July, recognizing her business, Cafe 7-10, on its 2nd Anniversary of "Making Downtown Erie More Sweet."

Below: Enjoying a visit to the Little Italy Farmers' Market with Erie Mayor Joe Sember, my colleague state Rep. Pat Harkins, and workers from the Sisters of St. Joseph Network.



At an April tour of the Erie Ale Works Brewery.



Touring the Northwest Tri-County Intermediate Unit 5 School vaccination clinic and its impressive operations earlier this year. A shoutout to our school workers and the PA National Guard for their vigilant work to keep everyone safe!



Honoring Rose Pardini with a House of Representatives citation on her 105th birthday in July!



Joining Erie County Executive Kathy Dahlkemper and the Erie County Department of Health to honor public health champions for 2020 and 2021.



Recognizing the Cathedral Prep boys golf and basketball teams for winning the PIAA state championship.



Above: Touring the Erie Police Dept.'s bomb squad facility, which includes a bomb-detonating robot made by Erie's own Telerob.



Above: Proud to honor Jim Berlin, CEO of Logistics Plus, as this vital Erie employer continues expanding its reach nationwide and globally.



Right: Trout stocking with my favorite fellow angler.

Left: A snowy February visit to the Sisters of St. Joseph Neighborhood office with some good Samaritans donating personal care items.





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Titus takes on ...

Hi all. Titus here. Bob tells me they're working on some good stuff down in Harrisburg to protect those of us with furrier coats and wetter noses. Some bills in the works would:



- Ban the sale of "puppy mill" dogs, cats and rabbits in pet stores, protect consumers from misleading sales tactics, and require more information from breeders.
- Restrict animal ownership for those who are convicted of animal abuse and allow the state Attorney General to help prosecute large-scale abuse cases.
- Increase the dog license fee for the first time in 25 years to address critical underfunding of the state Bureau of Dog Law Enforcement.
- Ban the sale of exotic animals.
- Ban transporting dogs in truck beds or on crates on top of vehicles – practices that are responsible for thousands of dog deaths each year.
- Increase the penalty for ear cropping not done by a licensed veterinarian.
- Increase maximum fines for illegally set body-gripping traps, which pose serious risks to family pets and other domestic animals.

I'm still trying to get Bob to introduce legislation that would require me to get a cheeseburger for dinner every night, but so far, that has gone nowhere.

Finally, here's a reminder to go along with our unpredictable Erie weather: PA law prohibits tethering your dog outside for longer than 30 minutes when temps are higher than 90 degrees or lower than 32 degrees.

Bringing your tax dollars home

I have been working hard to bring your tax dollars back to our district and region. Since my last newsletter report to you, Erie businesses, programs and residents have received nearly \$33 million in state grant funding. A few highlights include:

- **\$23 million** from the state Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program to fund multiple Erie revitalization projects.
- Nearly **\$2.6 million** to bring high-speed broadband to more Erie residents and businesses.
- More than **\$2.6 million** in tax credits to leverage investments in projects to address blight, stimulate business growth and improve quality of life for residents.
- **\$1.5 million** to expand the Northwest Pennsylvania Innovation Beehive Network so it can serve more area businesses and entrepreneurs; and \$200,000 to develop a tech training center for regional manufacturers.
- More than **\$1.4 million** to fund anti-crime, victim support and youth mentoring programs.
- More than **\$800,000** to fund Erie recreational fishing projects.
- Nearly **\$500,000** to fund ongoing blight removal and continue developing the West Eighth Street Anchor Buildings Project.
- Nearly **\$238,000** to bolster tech and computer curriculum for low-income students.

School funding increases by district

Although I believe our new state budget plan missed an opportunity to bring the full-scale, comprehensive education funding we need, there is some good news: all schools in our district will see funding increases for both basic and special education. They include:

- Erie City – **\$6.5 million** for basic education (7.9% increase); **\$647,000** for special education (5.8% increase).
- Fort LeBoeuf – **\$190,600** for basic education (2.7% increase); **\$42,000** for special education (3.4% increase).
- Millcreek Township – **\$376,400** for basic education (2.5% increase); **\$109,000** for special education (2.9% increase).