

STATE REPRESENTATIVE

# Bob Merski

## REPORT TO THE PEOPLE OF THE 2ND LEGISLATIVE DISTRICT



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## DEAR NEIGHBORS,

With the new year underway, I want to thank you for the honor of serving as your state Representative and update you on some state government happenings.

Although we are not yet out of the woods regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, we are seeing significant progress, as more and more people choose to get vaccinated. That has allowed schools, businesses, and event spaces to reopen. Even better, unemployment has been cut almost in half in just one year, bringing in revenues ahead of budget.

In Harrisburg, I have introduced bills to benefit our seniors, rejuvenate our communities and help municipal budgets. Some of those include proposals to:

- ✓ change the administrative code so our local police departments can have first access to used Pennsylvania State Police vehicles before they go to auction.
- ✓ conduct an actuarial study to determine whether allowing state employees to retire early helps or hurts the commonwealth.
- ✓ ensure that seniors do not lose eligibility for the Property Tax/Rent Rebate program simply because they receive a cost-of-living Social Security increase.

You can read about some of my other bills in the pages that follow.

Here at home, my talented staff has continued working throughout the pandemic to serve all your state-related needs, and we will remain “open for business” in the year ahead. 2022 is sure to bring new challenges and opportunities, and I will be with you every step of the way. The best is yet to come!

Sincerely,

Bob

## Help for young, start-up businesses

Few if any businesses have escaped the pandemic’s damaging effects. While programs have provided a measure of relief for some businesses, newer ones – those established after January 2020 – have been largely ineligible, even though they have felt the economic impact just as keenly.

To help them, I am introducing legislation that would provide a grant program for small start-up businesses that would have been ineligible for previous COVID-19 assistance. The program would provide grants of up to \$15,000 for eligible businesses that began operations between Jan. 1, 2020, and Dec. 31, 2021.

Every business deserves all the help we can provide, and my legislation would help ensure that young businesses trying to establish themselves in our community aren’t swept away before they get a chance to put down roots.

2021  
*by the numbers*



141

Bills & Resolutions Introduced or Sponsored



More than

\$23 Million

Brought Back to the District



688

Votes Cast



8,603

State Services Provided

# Bringing your tax dollars back to our district

In 2021, I worked to bring home more than \$23 million in state funding. That included:

- ✓ More than **\$18 million** for **urban renewal and infrastructure projects** to expand affordable housing, fight blight, expand business development, upgrade our regional food bank, and more.
- ✓ More than **\$3.8 million** to bolster **criminal justice and victim services programs** and educate children and families about the dangers of opioid use.
- ✓ More than **\$1.2 million** to area schools and colleges for a wide array of resources. (The funding is in addition to more than \$100 million in federal funding awarded to help defray pandemic expenses and to support continued learning during the pandemic.)
- ✓ More than **\$100,000** to local fire and EMS companies, **\$50,000** to area senior centers for operational support, nearly **\$50,000** to bolster security at several area nonprofit organizations, and additional funding to aid in vaccine education efforts.

## Expanding mobility through ‘microtransit’

Convenient access to public transportation is critical for connecting residents to work, health care, and other essential life activities, but many residents still lack this access.

Fortunately, small-scale transit and rideshare programs with flexible routes and on-demand scheduling can offer a solution for residents who live far from bus stops or face other mobility issues.

To help expand these “microtransit” options, I am introducing legislation that would establish a grant program to assist local transit authorities in providing these services.

The funding – administered by the Department of Community and Economic Development – would ensure these vital connections are available for all residents – regardless of where they live.

## My bills to battle blight

Vacant, blighted properties create a vicious cycle. They reduce the tax revenue available for public services like code enforcement, leading to further vacancies, declining property values, and more people leaving a neighborhood.

I recently introduced two bills that would help Erie and other cities break that cycle.

The first would create a grant program to help cities create new code enforcement programs or add staff to existing programs. The resources would help local governments respond to complaints, proactively root out trouble spots, and carry out enforcement efforts.

A second bill would make it easier to identify and contact property owners by requiring any purchaser to submit basic contact information – name, address, telephone number, and email address – to the county at the time of purchase. The information would be made available online.

Empowering community members to start civil dialogues would be an important complement to code enforcement efforts and another tool in our arsenal for banishing blight.

## Help for households struggling with water bills

A new, temporary program can help eligible households struggling with water bills or facing past-due bills. To learn more visit [www.dhs.pa.gov](http://www.dhs.pa.gov) and enter LIHWAP into the search bar.

## New program helps homeowners hurt by the pandemic

A recent program funded by the U.S. Department of the Treasury can help eligible Pennsylvania homeowners avoid default or foreclosure by assisting with qualified mortgage and housing expenses.

To qualify, homeowners must own and occupy a Pennsylvania property as their primary residence; have a household income equal to or less than 150% of the area median income; have experienced financial hardship after Jan. 21, 2020 (including a hardship that began before Jan. 21, 2020, and continued after that date); and meet several other requirements.

To learn more about the program and apply, visit <https://pahaf.org/>.

## My bills to benefit seniors

I recently introduced legislation to ensure seniors are not disqualified from the Property Tax/Rent Rebate Program simply because they receive a Social Security cost-of-living adjustment. Many seniors depend on the program and should not have to fear losing eligibility if a small COLA increase puts them over the income limit.

Another bill I have introduced would expand senior access to the “retired status” vehicle registration discount. Currently, retirees who receive Social Security or any other pension and whose total income does not exceed \$19,200 pay just \$10, instead of the full registration renewal fee.

While the discount is helpful, the maximum qualifying income of \$19,200 has not been increased since 1998. My bill would raise the limit to \$29,900 and allow it to be adjusted annually according to the Consumer Price Index.

To learn more about the existing discount, visit [www.dmva.pa.gov](http://www.dmva.pa.gov) and enter “retired status registration” into the search bar.

# Around the District



Touring Lavery Brewing Co., one of Erie's amazing breweries, in December.



Meeting with Dr. Susanne Kuligowski, the new executive director of Erie DAWN, in October.



Talking with some of our amazing volunteer firefighters during National Night Out, in August. I am constantly inspired by the dedication of Erie's police, fire and EMS workers.



I met up with students and instructors during an August tour of renovations and upgrades at Collegiate Academy and Erie High School.



I was delighted to attend the August open house of Christian Ministries hosted by Bishop Frankie Quinn and his wife, Lady Tracy Quinn.



It was exciting welcoming goodblend PA dispensary to our district in October.



It was an honor to be the keynote speaker at the Summit Township Veterans Memorial ceremony in November.



At the St. Paul's Italian Festival last August – a beloved Erie tradition for generations of residents!



At the ribbon-cutting for Stumpy's Hatchet House in November.



In September, I spoke at the opening of McDowell High School's innovative new manufacturing lab.



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## Take it from Titus

Titus here, with a message for anyone who may be considering an addition to their family.

I'm lucky enough to have a loving home, but sadly, I can't say the same for some of my friends. If you're thinking about adding a four-legged family member, please consider adopting from one of our amazing shelters.



Even if this isn't the right time to expand your family, please consider contacting one of the organizations below to see how you can help!

### Erie Humane Society

2407 Zimmerly Road  
(814) 835-8331

### Anna Shelter

1555 E. 10th St.  
(814) 451-0230

### Erie Animal Network

1158 W. 26th St.  
(814) 790-5531

### Happy Bark

P.O. Box 9062 • Erie 16505 • [info@happybark.org](mailto:info@happybark.org)

### Because You Care, Inc.

6041 West Rd., McKean • (814) 476-1212

Also, with lots of winter left, please remember that PA law prohibits tethering dogs outside for longer than 30 minutes in temperatures below 32 degrees Fahrenheit!

## Bridging the digital divide

A new law will bring historic advancements in broadband access by creating the Pennsylvania Broadband Development Authority, which will expand reliable, affordable Internet to unserved or underserved residents.

Passing this law was especially important to me because, as a former teacher, I know how critical Internet access is for today's students. Those lacking affordable, reliable broadband face a huge disadvantage.

The new law will help level the playing field for these students – and all underserved residents who have lacked access to telemedicine, online shopping, and the other vital connections affordable, reliable broadband brings.

If your household is struggling with broadband bills, please be aware that the Affordable Connectivity Program provides eligible households monthly discounts of up to \$30 on service. Learn more at <https://www.fcc.gov/acp>.

The FCC's Lifeline program also can provide discounts on qualifying monthly phone and broadband service or bundled voice-broadband packages.

Visit [www.fcc.gov/lifeline-consumers](http://www.fcc.gov/lifeline-consumers).

## New law expands PACENET benefits

Several new laws this year will expand seniors' access to prescription drug assistance and protect access to those benefits.

One law expands the income eligibility limits for the PACENET program from \$27,500 to \$33,500 for a single person and from \$35,500 to \$41,500 for a married couple. The law also removes the PACENET premium "clawback," which will result in premium cost savings for about 28,000 enrollees. (According to the state Department of Aging, the clawback will apply only to those who are enrolled in the program's Part D partner plans.)

A second new law extends the COLA moratorium, which allows enrollees to maintain their PACE/PACENET benefits despite income increases due to Social Security cost-of-living adjustments.

I was proud to help pass these bills, because seniors should never have to choose between affording their prescription medications and paying for other life necessities.

More information about PACENET is available by visiting the Department of Aging at [www.aging.pa.gov](http://www.aging.pa.gov) and clicking on the prescription assistance link at the top of the page.