



YOUR REPORT

from State Representative

ROBERT FREEMAN

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Freeman bill would give auditor general authority to audit legislature

Rep. Freeman has introduced legislation that would require the state auditor general to audit the General Assembly and its legislative service agencies.

Currently, the General Assembly is audited by a certified public accountant hired by the Legislative Audit Advisory Commission.

“I think it is imperative that we provide greater oversight of how tax dollars are spent by the legislature and this bill would do that,” Freeman said. “Requiring the elected auditor general to conduct these audits, as opposed to the current practice of the legislature hiring someone to perform the audit, will ensure a more public assessment of how the legislature spends the money it allocates for its operations.”

The auditor general is the chief watchdog of how state funds are spent and performs the audits of the various agencies of state government on a regular basis.

“Having the auditor general do the legislative audits will make it a more public and transparent process and has the added benefit of saving money since the need for hiring an outside firm would no longer exist.”

Freeman’s bill would require the auditor general to audit all financial accounts of the General Assembly annually, and to provide for special audits if necessary. The bill would require copies of all audits to be submitted to the president pro tempore of the Senate, the Senate minority leader, speaker of the House and the minority leader of the House. Copies of the audits would also be available to the public.

Bill would promote tutoring to improve academic performance

Rep. Freeman has introduced a bill designed to boost student achievement at little-to-no cost to taxpayers.

The bill would create a tutoring program in all Pennsylvania school districts where 11th- and 12th-graders could tutor elementary school-aged children for academic credit.

“State funding for education has been cut by nearly \$1 billion under the Corbett administration since 2010, which puts the academic success of our most vulnerable students at risk,” Freeman said. “This bill could be a valuable resource to help those students.

“The idea behind this proposal is to get students to succeed by helping each other. The one-on-one tutoring can help both sets of students. The high school students serve as positive role models for the younger students who also receive help with their studies. While the older students receive academic credit for

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State grants fund improvements to public market and local parks

Nearly \$600,000 has been awarded for three projects in Rep. Freeman’s Legislative District by the state’s Commonwealth Financing Authority through its Local Share Account. Generated by licensed gaming facilities, the funding is used to support community and economic development projects.

The Greater Easton Development Partnership received \$270,000 to repurpose the former Weller Center in Easton into a year-round indoor public market. A demonstration kitchen and community room also are planned for the market project so that nutrition and culinary programming may be offered. Hellertown received \$200,000 for ADA accessibility and accommodations at Water Street Park, and Williams Township received \$125,000 to build a concession stand with restroom facilities in Raubsville Park.

“Easton’s farmers’ market is the nation’s longest-running open-air market, and the establishment of an indoor public market will reuse a vacant building while enabling the community continued access to fresh food year-round,” Freeman said. “Adding restrooms and a concession stand to Raubsville Park will enhance the facilities at the park, as will improving accessibility at Water Street Park in Hellertown.”

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Freeman bill would encourage new life for old industrial buildings

“Adaptive reuse is a way to reuse buildings that have stood in our communities for decades,” said Rep. Freeman. He has introduced a bill that would use tax incentives to promote the redevelopment and reuse of older, vacant factory or mill buildings so they could be repurposed for commercial, office or arts space, as well as manufacturing.

It is not a new concept. Industrial buildings around the Lehigh Valley have been the focus of redevelopment efforts. Locally, the Simon Silk Mill complex on 13th Street in Easton is a project in the works that Freeman said could benefit from his legislation.

“The earliest buildings in the 14-acre Silk Mill complex were built in the late 19th century. They’re part of our history and once they are redeveloped, they can be part of a bright future,” he said.

The bill would establish three types of tax incentive programs:

- A 25 percent tax credit for the rehabilitation and reconstruction costs incurred by the owner of factories built before 1960;
- A business tax credit equal to the salaries and wages paid to full-time employees, up to a maximum of \$5,000 per employee; and
- An interest income tax credit of 10 percent on the interest from loans for the expenditures within the building. The limit would be up to \$10,000 per taxable year. The loan holder also would be eligible for a 100 percent tax credit, up to \$20,000 per taxable year, on interest from loans for substantial rehabilitation.

“Some of these buildings have withstood the test of time for more than 100 years. They might be vacant, but they’re still standing. 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.”

The idea for the bill came from historic preservationist Tom Jones of Easton who based the idea on a Rhode Island program.

Legislation would require make, model and year of vehicle on registration

Based on a suggestion by an Easton police officer, Rep. Freeman has introduced a measure that would require vehicle registration information in the Transportation Department’s database to include more information about the titled vehicle.

“There is a lot of information on title registrations, but much of that information is not required by law,” Freeman said. “This bill would ensure that the make, model and year of the vehicle is included as part of the registration information, which would make it easier for law enforcement to narrow down targeted vehicles when they are seeking to apprehend a criminal suspect.”

Current law requires the following information on vehicle title registrations:

- the registration number assigned the vehicle;
- name and address of the registrant;
- name and address of the owner if other than the registrant;
- vehicle identification number;
- expiration date; and
- other information as determined by the department.

Bill would promote tutoring

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helping the young students to achieve, they also hone their own understanding of academic subjects by taking on the responsibilities of being a tutor.”

Freeman’s plan also includes a provision that would encourage 11th and 12th grade students who are not meeting their academic potential to participate as tutors. Students who become tutors improve their own academic performance as a result of being tutors because they begin to take their own studies more seriously in order to help the young students they are tutoring.

“Helping someone by sharing your expertise, can, in turn, bring out the best in yourself. That’s a wonderful gift to share with others,” Freeman said.



Easton Public Works Director Dave Hopkins, Rep. Freeman, Easton Mayor Sal Panto and DCNR Deputy Secretary Nathan Flood plant a tree at Sullivan Park in recognition of the park receiving the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources’ 2014 Green Park Award. Rep. Freeman collaborated with Hopkins and the city of Easton to establish a wetlands along the edge of the park to mitigate flooding and helped secure state grant money for the improvements.



Personal Notes...

By Rep. Bob Freeman

Playing by the Rules

Dear Friends,

One of the recurring concerns I hear from constituents is how polarized politics has become in America. This has made Washington a dysfunctional place and has seeped into the political culture of Harrisburg in recent years, as political parties increasingly take partisan ideological positions on the issues of the day. Fashioning pragmatic solutions to problems is increasingly difficult in such an environment. While it is important to the functioning of a democracy for political parties to offer voters clear alternatives to choose from, the political imperative should take a back seat to fashioning good public policy once the election is over.

There is another important principle in government that needs to be observed to arrive at good policy decisions. That is the time-honored practice of playing by the rules. Every legislative body is governed by a set of rules that ensures proper procedure and deliberation. Through those rules the majority advances its agenda in an orderly and transparent fashion, and the minority is guaranteed its input. It is hoped that such thoughtful deliberation will fashion a better legislative product. Unfortunately, the polarization of politics has resulted, all too often, in a disregard of our rules by the Republican majority in the House. They have sought clever ways to play fast and loose with interpreting the rules to their own advantage, running roughshod over the minority. Even more troubling is how such a cavalier approach to the rules undermines the institutional integrity of the House as political expediency increasingly trumps rules and time-honored practices.

Throughout this session the Republican majority has interpreted the germaneness of amendments in such a narrow way as to block the consideration of proposals that previously were considered germane to the subject of a bill. This maneuver is used to prevent a vote on a proposal that is considered a tough vote to make. But we were elected to make the tough votes. The Republican majority also has used another maneuver to shut off all debate and consideration of other amendments and force a vote on a bill without allowing individual members to offer amendments or even discuss them. Such a "gag rule" approach to the legislative process is an affront to democracy and a corrosive influence on the proper operation of a legislative body. When I was first elected, this action (known as "moving the previous question") was rarely invoked and then only after protracted debate had bogged down consideration of a bill. Now it is used regularly without a second thought as to the damage such an extreme measure does to the institution.

In June the Republican leadership again tried to play fast and loose with the rules by seeking to use a motion not provided for in our rules to extract a bill immediately from committee. They totally disregarded the discharge resolution process which is required to be followed in such matters. While this maneuver ultimately was not used, it did show a disturbing willingness by

the Republican Leader to toss aside adopted rules of procedure and years of established precedent for political expediency.

I know that to many reading this column this sounds like a lot of obscure insider baseball. However, process is important in a democracy and to depart from it for pure political advantage serves only to undermine the validity of legislative actions and the trust that the citizens have placed in their elected representatives.

Throughout my legislative service I have championed the importance of good rules for the House. I joined forces with a Republican colleague in the early 1990s to get changes to our rules to ensure more timely notice to rank-and-file members of the bills to be voted on a session day. In 2007 I served on the Speaker's Reform Commission that made changes to our House rules that have made our process more transparent and deliberative than it was in the past and put in place measures to raise ethical standards. We should not allow an erosion of those reforms to serve partisan advantage. An institution like the General Assembly is more important than the political ambitions of an individual leader or individual rank-and-file member or particular political party. It is the responsibility of members of the House to serve as stewards of the public trust. That is achieved, in part, by adhering to a fair set of rules that spell out proper procedure and ensure thoughtful deliberation. It comes down to simply playing by the rules.

Sincerely,

Bob Freeman





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Freeman proposal would help municipalities with high levels of tax-exempt property

Throughout the Commonwealth, communities of all types and sizes contain a considerable percentage of tax-exempt property within their borders. While these tax-exempt properties usually represent the presence of important governmental institutions, not-for-profit medical facilities, or institutions of higher learning that contribute to the quality of life of a community, they do not contribute to the real estate tax base of the communities in which they are located as a result of their tax-exempt status.

Rep. Freeman has introduced legislation that would create the Tax-Exempt Property Municipal Assistance Fund, which would be funded by dedicating revenue generated by the 18 percent Johnstown Flood Tax to the new fund. Under the proposal, any Pennsylvania municipality where 15

percent or more of the total assessed value of properties within its borders is tax-exempt would qualify for compensation. The Johnstown Flood Tax, enacted by the state legislature in 1936 to provide financial relief to victims of flooding in Johnstown, is levied on the sale of wine and liquors and was intended to be temporary but now provides the state with approximately \$240 million in annual revenue.

“Without this infusion of much-needed funding, many of these communities face the very real prospect of failing as they fall deeper and deeper into financial distress,” Freeman said. “Without this compensating funding source, they will be forced to reduce essential services and continually increase their taxes as they attempt to deal with an ever-eroding tax base. With the revenue provided by

my Tax-Exempt Property Municipal Assistance Fund, we can stabilize hundreds of needy communities across Pennsylvania and ensure their success for years to come.”

Any community that is home to a major not-for-profit medical facility, institution of higher education or is the county seat is most likely to benefit from this proposed program. Easton, which is the county seat for Northampton, also is home to Lafayette College and numerous nonprofit organizations. It has been estimated that over 27 percent of Easton’s total real estate value is tax exempt as a result. Other Lehigh Valley communities also have high levels of tax-exempt property, such as Fountain Hill, where St. Luke’s Hospital is located, causing 40 percent of assessed value of property to be tax exempt.

Freeman bill would permit Easton, other small cities to participate in CRIZ program

Rep. Freeman has introduced a bill that would make more cities eligible for a state redevelopment program.

The City Revitalization and Improvement Zone (CRIZ) program is designed to stimulate economic development and job creation in the state’s smaller cities. Freeman’s bill would reduce the population threshold required to participate in the program from 30,000 to 20,000, enabling cities such as Easton, Hazleton, Johnstown, Lebanon, New Castle and Williamsport to qualify for the program.

“Several smaller cities have tried to attract economic development to revive their downtowns and spur job growth. This bill would enable more cities to obtain the tools they need to do just that, leveraging needed funding,” Freeman said.

The CRIZ program was created last year and is based on the

successful Neighborhood Improvement Zone program used in Allentown, which resulted in more than \$500 million in new investment for that city. CRIZ allows eligible cities to create an authority to issue bonds for redevelopment projects. The bonds are repaid using most state and local taxes generated within the CRIZ area during and after construction. Developers are required to supply at least 20 percent of the development cost for the project through private funding.

Currently, the program is limited to just eight cities: Altoona, Bethlehem, Erie, Lancaster, Reading, Wilkes-Barre, York and Chester. The program also permits one borough or township with at least 7,000 people to participate in a pilot program for smaller municipalities. Lancaster and Bethlehem were the first two cities selected for the CRIZ program.