



YOUR REPORT

from State Representative

ROBERT FREEMAN

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Freeman introduces bills to provide greater transparency in legislature and political campaigns

Rep. Bob Freeman has introduced legislation designed to offer greater transparency regarding how money is spent by the General Assembly and who's donating to its candidates.

The first bill (H.B. 1744) would require the state auditor general to audit the General Assembly and its legislative service agencies, rather than hiring a certified public accountant to do so.

"The auditor general is the chief watchdog of how state funds are spent," Freeman said. "His office audits 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 be required."

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. Copies of the audits would be submitted to House and Senate leaders and be made available to the public.

His second bill (H.B. 1745) would require candidates for the General Assembly to follow the same expense report requirements as candidates for statewide office. Currently, both General Assembly and statewide office candidates are required to file a report on the second Friday before an election, but only candidates for statewide office are required to report on the sixth Tuesday before the election.

"This change would provide earlier disclosure and greater transparency on who is contributing to candidates for

the General Assembly," Freeman said. "This is information voters should have access to earlier in a campaign than they currently do."

The currently required second-Friday expense report is filed just 10 days before the election. Freeman said that filing comes so close to the election that the information about where candidates are getting their contributions tends to get lost in the last week of campaign literature and other information.

"This would put everything on the table and allow voters to see who is backing which candidates and what they stand for, or more importantly, who they stand with," Freeman said.

Both measures have been referred to the House State Government Committee for review.

Grants announced for Easton Public Market, local museum and historical society

The Easton Public Market is another step closer to opening, thanks to a \$200,000 state grant Rep. Bob Freeman helped it to obtain.

The grant was awarded to assist with infrastructure improvements, including connecting vendor stalls with utilities and upgrading electric, to help make the market a year-round amenity for downtown Easton, Freeman said.

"It is an exciting project that will offer fresh produce and prepared foods year round and I commend the Greater Easton Development Partnership and all involved for advancing the project."

Downtown Easton has not had a large scale grocery store for many years. The public market will provide downtown residents with a venue for such groceries and the market will also be a draw for people living outside the downtown.

The Easton Public Market is located at the former Weller Health Education Center, 325 Northampton St., and is expected to open sometime in 2016.

continued page 2...

Freeman supports CHIP extension

Since 1992, Pennsylvania's Children's Health Insurance Program has helped hundreds of thousands of families afford health insurance coverage for their children. The governor recently signed Act 84 of 2015, supported by Rep. Bob Freeman, to ensure CHIP will continue.

"CHIP is a valuable program for many working, low-income families," Freeman said. "This bill ensures that all

continued page 2...

INSIDE:

Encouraging student success through peer tutoring....	pg. 2
Boosting economic development potential of small towns	pg. 2
Personal Notes: Budgets, Gridlock and Political Culture.....	pg. 3
Online voter registration now available.....	pg. 4
Housing authorities could have their own police presence under Freeman bill	pg. 4

Encouraging student success through peer tutoring

Rep. Bob Freeman has introduced legislation to create a tutoring program where 11th- and 12th-graders could tutor elementary school-aged children for academic credit.

“This proposal would be a valuable resource for every one of Pennsylvania’s school districts, not only because it is designed to boost student achievement at little-to-no cost to taxpayers, but also because it would get students to succeed by helping each other,” Freeman said.

“High school students would serve as positive role models for the younger students who receive help with their studies. While the older students receive academic credit for 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 juniors and seniors who are not meeting their academic potential to participate as tutors. He said students who become tutors improve their own academic performance 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.

CHIP extension *continued...*

children eligible for CHIP continue to have access to the health coverage they need, when they need it. I’m proud to have voted for the creation of CHIP back in 1992 and it has proven successful at providing affordable health insurance coverage for needy children in our commonwealth.”

CHIP provides free and low-cost health insurance to children from birth through 18. It covers immunizations; check-ups; diagnostic testing; prescriptions; dental, vision and hearing services; emergency care; mental health benefits; and hospitalization and substance abuse rehabilitation, among other services. The cost of the insurance depends on a family’s income. For example, a family of three earning up to \$41,778 may qualify for CHIP for free. If that same family earns up to \$63,083 annually, it could qualify for low-cost CHIP.

Currently, 150,985 children statewide are enrolled in CHIP. In Northampton County, 3,514 are enrolled.

Freeman voted to expand CHIP to cover additional families in 2006, and since then, the legislature has periodically voted to reauthorize CHIP every few years. Freeman also voted to end the requirement that children go without insurance for six months before being able to enroll in CHIP when the program was last reauthorized in 2013.

To find out more, visit CHIP online at www.chipcoverspakids.com.

Grants *continued...*

Also benefitting from state grants were The National Canal Museum in Easton and the Northampton County Historical and Genealogical Society. They received grants from the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission last year.

“Both of these museums contain outstanding historical collections, offer a wonderful resource to scholars and students, and bring visitors to Northampton County, thereby boosting our area’s tourism,” Freeman said.

The museum received \$5,784 and the historical society received \$8,373.

Boosting economic development potential of small towns is goal of Freeman bills

The state has a number of programs to help revitalize communities and stimulate economic development, but many of them are designed for larger cities. Rep. Bob Freeman wants to help smaller cities.

His first bill (H.B. 659) would let communities extend their participation in the Main Street Program for up to five years. The second bill (H.B. 660) would make more small cities eligible for the state’s City Revitalization and Improvement Zone program.

“Our small towns and cities face many of the same challenges of larger, urban areas, but sometimes they get overlooked,” Freeman said. “My legislation would help ensure their success by assisting them with downtown revitalization and stimulating economic development and job creation.”

The state’s Main Street Program provides grants to help revitalize downtown districts and pay for a full-time Main Street manager who works with local officials and merchants to implement a downtown revitalization plan. Current involvement in the program is limited to five years.

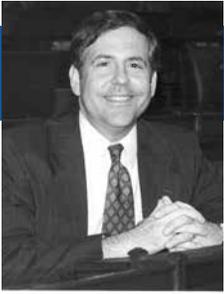
“Unfortunately, we have seen in numerous cases that the current five-year time frame to turn around a traditional downtown is too short. A community just begins to see the progress brought on by Main Street initiatives only to see the plug pulled prematurely, often causing the downtown’s success to suffer,” Freeman said. “An additional year or two of support can make all the difference.”

His other bill would reduce the population eligibility requirement from 30,000 to 20,000 for the City Revitalization and Improvement Zone program, which

is designed to stimulate economic development and job creation in the state’s smaller cities by leveraging state tax revenue generated within a CRIZ community to attract private investment and foster significant development.

“Several smaller cities have labored 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,” he said.

Allentown currently is a Neighborhood Improvement Zone-designated community and Bethlehem is a CRIZ-designated community. With a population of 28,000, Easton currently just misses eligibility in CRIZ. Under Freeman’s bill, Easton, Hazleton and several other small third-class cities would be able to apply and participate in the CRIZ program.



Personal Notes...

By Rep. Bob Freeman

Budgets, Gridlock, and Political Culture

Dear Friends,

The current fiscal year has been a frustrating and protracted year, to say the least. Early in 2015 Gov. Tom Wolf unveiled his ambitious budget proposal for Pennsylvania. Following up on his campaign pledges, he proposed a severance tax on the drilling for natural gas in Pennsylvania to raise sufficient revenue to restore funding to public education that had been cut during the previous Corbett administration. He also sought the restoration of funding for human services line items that had been drastically cut under Corbett as well. In addition, he proposed reducing school property taxes by raising the Personal Income Tax (PIT) and sales tax, and using much of that revenue to reduce school property taxes and to fix the state's structural deficit to put Pennsylvania on a firmer financial footing. The state's bond rating was suffering and the one-time transfer of funds and budgetary gimmicks used by the previous administration to pass a budget were no longer feasible. Despite these fiscal facts, the Republican-dominated legislature passed a budget that looked pretty much like the previous year's budget. Gov. Wolf vetoed that budget for being unbalanced and failing to restore the funding to education that he had sought.

What ensued was a dysfunctional period of negotiation between the governor and Republican legislative leaders that led nowhere in trying to find a compromise on the budget, despite many concessions being offered by the governor. Months passed and still no resolution to the impasse. Out of my own frustration and a desire to resolve this unprecedented budget crisis, I offered my own compromise budget proposal in October. My proposal split the difference, calling for a stop-gap budget for

the first six months of the fiscal year that resembled last year's budget, but holding out the potential for the governor to secure funding for his priorities with the budget that would be passed for the remaining six months. I identified reasonable and fair revenue sources to fund this compromise and even proposed that \$2 billion of that revenue would go to school property tax relief, significantly lowering school property taxes for the average taxpayer. Many members of the legislature expressed support for my proposal but, unfortunately, legislative leaders were locked in an ideological battle that made a pragmatic compromise less than likely. While a budget did reach the governor's desk and was signed, albeit with the line item vetoing of certain appropriations to keep the negotiations going for a final budget, no real resolution of differences seemed in sight. How had Harrisburg gotten to this point?

A number of factors have created the current budget impasse. First is the nature of our state's political culture and the fact that state elections have two separate constituencies. Statewide candidates face a different overall voting pattern than do candidates for legislative seats who run in gerrymandered districts that do not reflect the statewide political tendencies among voters. In line with this is the fact that the political parties have become terribly polarized to the point where a reasonable compromise seems beyond the reach of policy makers for fear of alienating one's political base.

Harrisburg has always been a rather partisan place, but there was always a measure of pragmatism that, at the end of the day, got things done. Past leaders of the legislature like K. Leroy Irvis, Jim Manderino and Matt Ryan were "institution men" who were pragmatic enough, despite their philosophical differences, to reach a deal on the budget and other policy initiatives required to address the needs of our Commonwealth. Today, a strict adherence to ideological dogma seems more important than adopting practical policy measures. In the 24-7 news cycle and never-ending political campaign mode that we seem to find ourselves in, inflammatory sound bites seem to trump sound public policy. That is unfortunate for our democratic process and the functioning of government. While I anticipate a final resolution to the budget impasse before the end of this fiscal year it is going to be a protracted and tortuous journey to get there. Hopefully, cooler heads will prevail and putting the needs of Pennsylvanians over ideological dogma will win out in the end. You can count on me to continue to work for a positive resolution to this impasse and a genuine addressing of the issues that we need to confront to move Pennsylvania forward.

Sincerely,



Rep. Freeman at his news conference unveiling his budget proposal compromise.



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Housing authorities could have their own police presence under Freeman bill

Housing authorities in the state's two largest cities are allowed to form their own police force, but that's not the case in Pennsylvania's smaller cities. Rep. Bob Freeman has plans to change that.

"Public housing authorities in our smaller cities face the same problems with criminal activity that Pittsburgh and Philadelphia do," Freeman said. "All public housing authorities should have the ability to set up their own police force in order to better combat crime."

Under Freeman's bill, housing authority police officers would patrol public housing projects. They would be required to complete the same state-required training and accreditation as municipal police officers, and the funding for these police forces would come from public housing authority budgets. However, forming a housing authority police force would not be required.

"Some authorities may choose to simply hire a detective instead of a full-blown police force," Freeman said. "Either way, they could determine what would be the most appropriate approach to enhancing law enforcement efforts to help ensure the safety of residents and neighbors alike."

Freeman said this bill also would provide a benefit for municipal police departments. "There are times when criminal activity in public housing projects can stretch municipal police departments thin. Allowing public housing authorities to form their own force would help to free up the municipal police officers so they can address crime in other neighborhoods."

Freeman said the idea for this legislation came from Larry Hendershot, a constituent who previously served on the Easton Housing Authority and is a former police officer.



Rep. Freeman reads 'Number One Sam' by Greg Pizzoli to children at Northampton Community College's Reibman Hall Children's Center as part of Week of the Young Child.

Online voter registration now available

Pennsylvania just launched a website to make it easier to register to vote. It can be accessed on the Department of State website: www.dos.pa.gov. Here is a direct link: <http://bit.ly/1NCHCYp>.

The website lets voters make updates to their voter record, such as change of name, address or party affiliation. Voters also can request assistance at a polling place.

The site is directly linked to PennDOT's Motor Voter system, so if the registrant has a driver's license or PennDOT ID card, the signature on file can immediately be linked to the voter record.

If registrants do not have a driver's license or ID card, the completed application can be printed, signed and mailed to the person's county voter registration office. If printing is not possible, the individual may request the Department of State to mail him or her a signature card to complete and send back.

"Allowing citizens to register to vote online will make it easier for those who are eligible to vote to participate in the electoral process," Freeman said. "Online registering is a natural extension of the current registering-to-vote-by-mail procedure."