



YOUR REPORT

from State Representative

ROBERT FREEMAN

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Ending Gerrymandering through Redistricting Reform

Legislation has been introduced this session in both the House (House Bill 722) and the Senate (Senate Bill 22) to put an end to the practice of gerrymandering in Pennsylvania where legislative districts are drawn for purely partisan advantage without consideration for keeping recognizable communities of interest within the same legislative district. Rep. Bob Freeman is a co-sponsor of House Bill 722 which was introduced last year by Rep. Steve Samuelson of Bethlehem. Sen. Boscola is the sponsor of Senate Bill 22.

“Ending the practice of gerrymandering legislative districts is one of the most fundamental things we can do to change the political culture of Pennsylvania,” Freeman said. “If districts were drawn in a nonpartisan way that would follow clear standards of compactness and minimize the disruption to communities, preventing district lines from dividing municipalities and

counties unnecessarily, then the interests of recognizable communities would be better served. Greater competitiveness and moderating ideological extremes are likely to result from districts that are not overwhelmingly drawn to create a ‘safe’ district for one political party over another.”

The proposed legislation would establish an independent citizens’ commission to redistrict Congressional, state Senate, and state House districts after each decennial census. Under the current process, state Senate and state House districts are drawn up by a legislative reapportionment commission dominated by party caucus leaders which has resulted in district lines being drawn to protect incumbents no matter how distorted the maps look. For Congressional districts, the General Assembly and Governor decide the district lines by passing a bill which, after the last census, resulted in a very gerrymandered map due to the

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Making Health Care Insurance more Affordable and Competitive

While the Affordable Care Act comes under attack in Washington, Rep. Bob Freeman is proposing a way for Pennsylvanians to access an affordable health care insurance option that would provide a quality insurance product and create more competition in the health insurance field.

Under Freeman’s legislation, the State Workers’ Insurance Fund (SWIF), which currently sells workers compensation insurance to businesses that cannot obtain it from private insurance companies, would be permitted to also sell health insurance to both businesses and individuals. SWIF was established many years ago to provide workers’ compensation insurance as an insurer of last resort.

“By allowing SWIF to offer health insurance, it would make a quality insurance product available to Pennsylvanians at a lower cost than current rates offered by private insurance companies because of SWIF’s lower administrative overhead,” Freeman said.

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Freeman Proposes Having State Auditor General Audit Legislature's Expenses

Rep. Bob Freeman has reintroduced legislation (House Bill 1257) that would require the state Auditor General to audit the financial affairs of the legislature and its legislative service agencies. Currently, the General Assembly is audited by a certified public accountant hired by the Legislative Audit Advisory Commission.

"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 tax dollars since there would no longer be the cost of hiring an outside firm to do the auditing. We would also be guaranteeing greater accountability by having the audit conducted by the independently elected state Auditor General rather than a firm hired by the legislature."

Freeman's bill would require the Auditor General to audit the financial accounts of the General Assembly annually and to conduct special audits if necessary. Copies of the audits would be submitted to the House and Senate leaders and made available to the public.

"In light of recent revelations that settlements have been paid out by legislative caucuses regarding sexual harassment allegations and other workplace-related issues, my legislation is very timely and needed now more than ever," Freeman said. "It is in the best interest of the people of Pennsylvania that we have greater transparency and more accountability as to how the legislature spends taxpayers' money."

Auditor General Eugene DePasquale has endorsed Freeman's legislation and has publicly urged the legislature to pass his bill, which is pending in the House Finance Committee.

Ending Gerrymandering through Redistricting Reform

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control of both houses and the governor's office by the Republican Party following the 2010 election. Republicans ended up claiming 13 of Pennsylvania's 18 Congressional seats even though there are close to a million more registered Democrats in the state.

As a result of the Republican reapportionment plan, the Lehigh Valley's 15th Congressional District was cut up with the eastern half of Northampton County being put in with the Scranton and Wilkes-Barre-oriented 17th District, while the remainder of the 15th stretched from Williams Township on the Delaware River to Londonderry Township on the Susquehanna River, spanning across five counties, a distance of 100 miles.

House Bill 722's independent citizens commission would be made up of four Democrats, four Republicans, and three independents or non-affiliated registered voters. Those wishing to serve on the commission could not have any political ties and would submit their names to be considered to the Commonwealth's Secretary of State who would then randomly select names from the pools of likely commissioners.

"Redistricting reform would end the practice of legislators choosing their voters, instead of voters choosing their legislator," Freeman noted.

Freeman has been a co-sponsor of Redistricting Reform legislation since the 1990s.

House Bill 722 and Senate Bill 22 are strongly backed by Fair Districts PA, a citizens' advocacy coalition that includes such good government groups as Common Cause and the League of Women Voters.

Making Health Care Insurance more Affordable and Competitive

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"By having a public health insurance option competing in the market place, we would ensure competition in the health insurance field, while also providing a yardstick by which to measure the fairness of rates charged by private health insurance companies.

"Health insurance rates are increasing considerably and I believe that my proposal will help to bring health insurance policies back to an affordable range for the average Pennsylvanian," Freeman noted.

This new, expanded health care product by SWIF would not be an added cost to taxpayers as the offering would be paid for through the premiums paid by health insurance subscribers and a possible loan from the SWIF fund that would be paid back.

Freeman's SWIF health insurance bill is House Bill 1966 and is pending in the House Insurance Committee.



Rep. Freeman with Alison Bergin at the Speaker's rostrum in the House. Alison is a Lehigh University student who interned in the District Office in the fall of 2016.



Personal Notes...

Budget Battles, Policy Fights, and a Good Government Initiative

Dear Friends,

Last year's state budget was passed on time, but the revenue necessary to fund it was not settled until the fall as the Republican-dominated legislature and Governor Tom Wolf continued to spar over funding priorities and how to pay for them. While the revenue side was finally settled, it was pretty much a patchwork of sources with expanded gambling being a part of the equation.

One disturbing feature of the revenue picture was the Republican proposal to borrow \$1.5 billion against the Tobacco Settlement Agreement Fund in order to pay for the General Fund Budget. It is never a sound fiscal practice to borrow large sums of money for the general operating expenses of government. While borrowing for infrastructure projects and other capital projects makes sense due to the long-term investment that such capital improvements present, it is risky fiscal policy to borrow money for the day-to-day operation of the government and government programs. This practice can negatively affect the state's bond rating, perpetuate the structural deficit that Pennsylvania's budgets have experienced for the last several years, and leave future generations saddled with a huge debt. That is why I voted against the proposal to borrow such a large sum of money against the Tobacco Settlement Agreement Fund.

What is needed to address the state's structural deficit and long-term fiscal stability is to have reliable funding streams. One of the potential sources for revenue that has gone untapped is the enactment of a severance tax on the drilling for natural gas in Pennsylvania. I have been a longtime supporter of establishing a severance tax and have co-sponsored legislation to do that. Pennsylvania is the largest source of natural gas in the country and we are the only natural gas-producing state that does not levy such a tax. Even conservative states like Texas, Alaska, Wyoming and North Dakota levy severance taxes on the drilling of natural gas. Because they do, these states were not as severely impacted by the Great Recession. A severance tax makes sense and would simply call upon the oil and gas companies doing the drilling to pay their fair share in taxes to the people of Pennsylvania for taking a Pennsylvania resource out of the ground; a resource that gives these drillers huge profits. A severance tax is long overdue in our state.

Unfortunately, the severance tax proposal that is before the House for consideration has been terribly compromised by a series of amendments that have been inserted into the bill over the course of our lengthy debate on the legislation. To

begin with, the severance tax envisioned is insignificant in terms of the revenue it would raise. Instead of a reasonable severance tax along the lines of that levied in neighboring West Virginia, which could generate half a billion dollars in revenue for Pennsylvania, this watered down severance tax would produce an anemic \$100 million in revenue at best.

What is worse, numerous amendments have made it into the bill that would undercut important environmental protections. Among them is a provision to have drilling permits deemed approved if not acted upon in a short span of time by DEP, whether or not the application is correct and appropriate. Other poison pill amendments would wrest oversight on air quality issues from DEP and give it to a politically appointed panel, lower water quality standards for water affected by drilling, freeze existing unconventional well permit fees for four years and alleviate the need for a driller to apply for a new permit if they choose to move the drilling hole to another site within a certain distance of the original well. With these poison pill amendments in the bill, it doesn't strike me as worth it to enact such a severance tax on these terms.

So much of the partisan bickering and maneuvering that has taken place on the budget and such important policy proposals as a severance tax is the outgrowth of a political system that has become increasingly partisan along very divisive lines. We see this in particular in Washington these days, but even Harrisburg seems handicapped by this overly partisan environment that robs the institutions of government of the pragmatism necessary to get things done and enact sound public policy.

One way to change this political culture is to amend the state constitution to provide for redistricting reform. You can read about that effort in this issue of my newsletter. Passing redistricting reform would go a long way in influencing our political system to be more reasonable by drawing districts that represent genuine communities of interest and end the creation of super-safe partisan districts that make moderation and compromise from legislators less likely. It would also foster a return to reasoned political debate in campaigns that would be less a litmus test of a candidate's ideological purity and more a forum for ideas and the chance for voters to choose a productive policy path for our Commonwealth. The voters deserve nothing less.

Sincerely,

Bob Freeman

Seeking Earlier Disclosure in Campaign Finance Reporting

Rep. Freeman has introduced legislation (House Bill 1627) that would require candidates for the General Assembly to file an additional earlier campaign finance report in the course of their campaigns, following the same expense reporting requirements that exist for statewide candidates.

Currently, candidates for the General Assembly and statewide office are required to file a report of their campaign contributions and expenses on the second Friday before the election, but statewide candidates are required to file a report by the sixth Tuesday before an election as well, revealing who their contributors are earlier in a campaign.

“This change in the campaign finance law would provide earlier disclosure, and therefore create 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 to see what interest groups a candidate aligns themselves with.”

With candidates for the General Assembly being required to only file a report on the second Friday before voters go to the polls, the information as to who is funding a candidate’s campaign often gets lost in the deluge of information that comes out in the closing days of a campaign through the flood of candidates’ ads and mailers.

“With the additional reporting requirement in my bill, voters would find out earlier who is backing which candidate for the General Assembly and thereby find out what the candidate stands for, or more importantly, who they stand with,” Freeman said.

Property Tax/Rent Rebate Forms to be Available by March

The Property Tax/ Rent Rebate Program benefits eligible Pennsylvanians age 65 or older, widows and widowers age 50 to 64, and people with disabilities age 18 to 64. The maximum rebate for homeowners is \$650. Homeowners may qualify for an extra 50% of their base rebate, if their income is \$30,000 or less and they pay more than 15% of their income in property taxes. Renters are eligible for a maximum rebate of \$500.

The annual household income limit is \$35,000 for homeowners and \$15,000 for renters, but only half of a person’s Social Security is counted as income for this program.

2017 rebate applications will be available in Rep. Freeman’s district office by early March 2018. Those who have received rebates in the past should be getting a rebate form in the mail. Constituents who are seeking assistance in filling out their rebate form can call Freeman’s office and schedule an appointment.

Libre’s Law to strengthen Pennsylvania’s Animal Abuse Law enacted by Legislature

Last year the legislature passed, with Rep. Freeman’s affirmative vote, legislation to strengthen Pennsylvania’s animal abuse law. The bill was signed into law by Governor Tom Wolf. Freeman was proud to support this legislation.

The new law now provides a clear outline between summary offenses, misdemeanors, and felony charges pertaining to animal abuse. The new law also allows for felony charges in animal abuse cases, in addition to the felony charges that can be levied for organized animal fights and the killing of endangered species.

Other updates include requiring those convicted of serious animal abuse to surrender their pets, strengthening protection for horses, banning all-day tethering of dogs, and banning the tethering of dogs during inclement weather without proper shelter, food, or water.

“This legislation will go a long way to stopping animal abuse in Pennsylvania by putting in place more severe penalties for abuse and clearly outlining what constitutes abusive behavior,” Freeman said.

Libre is the seven-week-old Boston terrier puppy that was found hours from death on a Lancaster County farm. He was dehydrated, emaciated, and infected and was given next to no chance to live. He did survive and his story went on to inspire action by the legislature.



Rep. Freeman with members of the Bladder Cancer Advocacy Network who came to Harrisburg in April 2017 for the passage of HR 241 declaring May as Bladder Cancer Awareness Month.

Main Street Program Bill Reported from Committee, Awaits House Action

Legislation sponsored by Rep. Bob Freeman that would allow communities in the state Main Street Program to extend their participation in the program for up to an additional five years was unanimously reported out of the House Local Government Committee at the end of June last year.

The Main Street Act was created to establish a program to help with the revitalization of traditional commercial downtowns. Under the program, grants are made available to improve infrastructure features, market and promote the downtown, attract businesses, and provide façade grants under the direction of a Main Street manager. Currently, communities are limited to only five years in the program.

“Providing a period of only five years to revitalize a traditional downtown under the Main Street Program is often too short a span of time to effectively devise a revitalization plan and to fully implement it,” Freeman noted. “Many communities just get started and begin to see progress when the plug of financial assistance is pulled, causing the program to backslide in communities where it was making a significant difference. By allowing up to a total of 10 years in the program, we would be enhancing the ability of Main Street communities to get the goals of their revitalization plan across the finish line.”

The Department of Community and Economic Development would be authorized to make the decision as to whether or not a participating community in the Main Street Program would benefit from an additional five-year period in the program. One of the aims of the legislation is to provide funding for the Main Street manager in a participating community. While bricks and mortar grants are available to communities, it is often difficult to find funding to cover the cost of employing a Main Street manager in many communities with limited resources. The manager’s role is critical in implementing a plan and seeing that objectives are carried out and met.

The bill awaits action by the full House.

Tutoring Proposal would Improve Academic Performance of Students

Enhancing the academic performance of students is the aim of Rep. Bob Freeman’s proposed legislation (House Bill 1449) that would require in-house tutoring programs in all Pennsylvania school districts.

Under the legislation, high school juniors and seniors would be able to earn academic credit for tutoring elementary school students in grades one through six who are in need of additional help to improve their academic performance.

“Tutoring is a time-honored way of enhancing the academic performance of any student struggling in school. It is particularly helpful for elementary school students to bring them up to speed on their course work and to improve their understanding of their studies in order to make sure that they don’t fall behind in school and never catch up,” Freeman said.

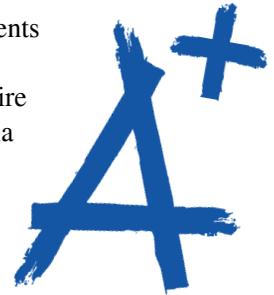
Children in elementary school often are more receptive to listening and learning from a good teenage role model than they are from an adult authority figure. That’s one of the achievements of the Big Brothers, Big Sisters program.

A provision is made in Freeman’s bill to encourage those high school juniors and seniors who are not performing up to their potential in school to possibly become tutors if it is felt that the experience would help them academically as well.

“It has been shown that tutoring not only benefits the students being tutored, but also improves the academic performance of the students doing the tutoring, who now take their studies more seriously due to their new found responsibility for helping younger students to succeed,” Freeman noted.

School districts would be able to implement the program at little or no cost to taxpayers since students would be tutoring students.

Freeman has introduced his tutoring proposal in past sessions of the legislature. This session he has met with the chairman of the House Education Committee and his staff to press for consideration of his bill in committee and has held numerous meetings with various education stakeholders representing teachers and administrators to garner support and elicit suggestions on improving the bill.





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**Property
 Tax/Rent
 Rebate Forms
 available in
 March.**
*See inside on
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Rep. Bob Freeman makes himself available to meet with constituents from the western end of his district in Hellertown Borough Hall on the first Thursday of every month from 10:30 a.m. until 2:30 p.m.

Hellertown Days

Following are the dates that Rep. Freeman will be in Hellertown to meet with constituents:

February 1	June 7	October 4
March 1	July 5	November 1
April 5	August 2	December 6
May 3	September 6	

State Funding Secured for Worthy Local Projects

Numerous state grants have been secured in Rep. Freeman's district over the last year. Below is a list of some of the projects that have been awarded state funding:

- \$500,000 to Freemansburg Borough for upgrades and improvements to its municipal building.
- \$197,333 for improvements to Easton Centre Square to improve circulation and address ADA compliance issues.
- \$200,000 to the City of Easton to improve pedestrian safety and redesign traffic flow along Wood Avenue to the 13th Street exit of Route 22.
- \$98,667 to Hellertown Borough for improvements to Dimmick Park.

- \$1 million in Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program funding to the City of Easton to assist in the construction of a parking garage at North Fourth Street.
- A \$3.4 million low-interest loan from the Pennsylvania Infrastructure Investment Authority (Pennvest) to the Easton Suburban Water Authority to replace 1.6 miles of distribution piping, install control valves, hydrants and service laterals.

"This funding will help considerably in getting these worthy projects completed," Freeman noted.

