



YOUR REPORT

from State Representative

ROBERT FREEMAN

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Constituent Service Office: 215 Northampton St. • Easton, PA 18042 • (610) 253-5543

Harrisburg Office: 207 Irvis Office Building • P.O. Box 202136 • Harrisburg, PA 17120-2136 • (717) 783-3815

Webpage: www.RepFreeman.com

Governor signs bill to rein in abusive use of fireworks

The governor recently signed legislation into law that will put some sensible restrictions on the use of consumer fireworks. Although the law was not Rep. Robert Freeman’s bill (H.B. 1628), it did contain similar provisions.

While Rep. Freeman and several other Lehigh Valley lawmakers would have preferred a ban on consumer fireworks, they noted that the new law addresses a number of the concerns that have been raised in communities across the state.

The state law concerning fireworks was loosened in 2017 to allow for the use of consumer-grade fireworks. In many locations across Pennsylvania, that usage has become a real nuisance on an almost weekly basis, particularly during warmer weather. Freeman voted

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Members of the FamilieSCN2A Foundation are flanked by Rep. Steve Samuelson and Rep. Bob Freeman on the left and Rep. Joe Ciresi and Speaker Bryan Cutler on the right in the House chamber on a recent visit to Harrisburg. This year, the House officially recognized Feb. 24 as Pennsylvania’s SCN2A Awareness Day, which was sponsored by Freeman, Samuelson and Ciresi. SCN2A is a gene that is thought to play a role in the development of autism and other neurodevelopmental and epilepsy disorders.

PA Secretary of Agriculture visits Easton’s Urban Farm, praises its success story

On Friday, July 15, Pennsylvania Secretary of Agriculture Russell Redding visited Easton’s Urban Farm as part of his recent tour promoting Urban Ag Week in Pennsylvania. Secretary Redding praised the great success story of the Easton Urban Farm, located behind the Easton Area Neighborhood Center in South Side Easton on property owned by the city. Rep. Robert Freeman joined Secretary Redding, Easton Area Neighborhood Center Executive Director Ross Marcus, Mayor Sal Panto, County Executive Lamont McClure, and Democratic House Agriculture Chairman Rep. Eddie Day Pashinski to praise the accomplishments of the farm and highlight funding that has been made available to promote urban farm initiatives.

Easton’s Urban Farm is located on only two-thirds of an acre but produces a wide variety of fresh vegetables. Last year the farm harvested 11,000 pounds of fresh produce. Half of the farm’s yield goes to the Easton Area Neighborhood Center’s Food Pantry which assists needy families with their nutritional needs. This year the remainder of the produce is distributed through the new West Ward Farmers Market, social service agencies, and other food pantries.

“It really provides an assist to those families who are truly in need,”

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PA Secretary of Agriculture visits Easton's Urban Farm, praises its success story

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said Freeman. "It's not well known in the public, perhaps, but there are a lot of families who struggle to provide this kind of nutritious food to their families in the course of their day every day. And this has brought home the

importance of making that available."

The Easton Urban Farm is one of almost 100 urban ag operations across the state that has received support in the past with funding from the Pennsylvania Urban Agricultural

Infrastructure Grant Program. That program received another \$500,000 in funding to this year's state budget to assist urban ag operations around the state. Revisions to the program guidelines make it more accessible for urban communities to apply for grants. The match requirement was lowered from 50% to 15%, and eligible projects now only need one factor for grant eligibility, rather than the previous requirement to meet all four. Those factors include improving agricultural infrastructure in an urban area; facilitating the aggregation of agricultural products in an urban area; sharing resources among urban agricultural operations, producers, and community organizations; and supporting community development in the project area.

"Easton's Urban Farm is part of an ongoing effort to make fresh, locally grown produce available in urban areas that are often food deserts, due to a lack of supermarkets being located in urban areas," Freeman noted. "The success of local farmers' markets like the Easton Farmers Market and the Saucon Valley Farmers Market in Hellertown are other great opportunities for people to access fresh, locally grown produce in their community."



L to R – Secretary Redding, Rep. Pashinski, Ross Marcus, Rep. Freeman, and Lamont McClure at the Easton Urban Farm news conference held on July 15.

Governor signs bill to rein in abusive use of fireworks

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against the 2017 law out of concerns for the disruptions their use would cause in residential neighborhoods.

"It was important to give local governments the ability to deal with this disruptive behavior and to impose substantial penalties for violating the law. Both of those items are covered in this law," Freeman said. "The option for municipalities to ban the use of fireworks in their community, except for a number of limited holidays, provides a real opportunity to restore the quality of life and peace and quiet in our neighborhoods throughout the non-holiday days of the year."

The new law extends the distance to 150 feet from buildings and vehicles where fireworks could be used, prohibits usage between 10 p.m. and 10 a.m. except during the July 4 holiday and New Year's Eve, and gives municipalities the option to ban their usage most of the year, except for the July 4 holiday, New Year's Eve, and the Memorial Day and Labor Day weekends.

Other changes:

- requires competent knowledge of safety and handling to set off display fireworks.
- drops the \$2 million insurance to \$1 million for municipalities for community display fireworks.
- prohibits their use within 150 feet of an animal housing facility or fenced livestock area and requires written notification within 72 hours if consumer fireworks are shot off within 300 feet of them.
- permits municipalities to ban the use of consumer fireworks, even on approved holidays, if they are not able to comply with the 150-foot setback requirements.

Penalties imposed:

- the fine for violating the proper use of consumer fireworks will increase from \$100 to up to \$500.
- the fine for violating the sales of consumer fireworks will be not less than \$10,000 (the current fine is up to \$5,000).
- the fine for violating the sales or use of display fireworks will be not less than \$10,000.
- the fine for violating the sales of federally illegal explosives will be not less than \$10,000.
- Subsequent offenses for the same violation will result in higher fines and a higher grade of offense if the violation results in a conviction within three years of the first conviction.

Bonus payment for Property Tax/ Rent Rebate Program recipients

Pennsylvania’s Property Tax/Rent Rebate Program provides assistance to seniors and others who qualify for the program. This year there will be a one-time additional payment made to the recipients of the program.

“I supported allocating \$140 million in federal American Rescue Plan funds that our state had received in order to provide this boost in property tax relief,” Rep. Robert Freeman said. “This added bonus will help many of our senior citizens who depend on their rebates to compensate for high property taxes or high rents.”

Those who filed for the 2021 rebate can expect to receive a one-time additional payment of between \$175 to \$455 in the coming months. If they have filed their application for their rebate, they do not need to do anything to receive the bonus. It will automatically be sent to them in the coming months. The bonus will amount to 70% of what their original rebate amount is. Rebates range from \$250 to \$650 for homeowners based upon their income level. Homeowners can earn up to \$35,000 in income and still be eligible for a rebate. Renters’ rebates

range from \$500 to \$650, and they can have an income of up to \$15,000 to qualify for a rebate. Under the program, only half of an applicant’s Social Security is counted as income, making more senior citizens eligible to participate in the program. To be eligible for the rebate, a person has to be either 65 or older, a widowed individual who is 50 or older, or a person with disabilities who is 18 or older.

The size of the bonuses will vary based on income levels. Homeowners with eligible income up to \$8,000 will receive an extra \$455. Those with incomes between \$8,001 and \$15,000 will get an extra \$350. In the \$15,001 to \$18,000 income range, a homeowner will receive an extra \$210, and those with incomes between \$18,001 and \$35,000 will get an extra \$175. Renters with eligible income up to \$8,000 will receive an extra \$455 and those with incomes between \$8,001 and \$15,000, an extra \$350.

Qualifying Pennsylvanians can still apply for the 2021 rebate program and also obtain the 70% bonus rebate until the end of this year.

Freeman offers bill to provide voters with earlier information on campaign contributions

Rep. Robert Freeman has reintroduced legislation that would require Pennsylvania House and Senate candidates to file campaign expense reports at more frequent intervals to create a more transparent reporting process during an election year.

The legislation would require candidates for the Pennsylvania General Assembly to also file campaign expense reports on or before the sixth Tuesday before the election. They are currently only required to file on the second Friday before the election, but this legislation would add the additional filing, matching the campaign expense report filing requirement of candidates for statewide office.

“The 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 a candidate is getting contributions from 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.

“It also would have an added benefit for candidates since the last filing before the election would end up being shorter, as it would cover a shorter period of time than what is currently required.”

Homeowners 	Standard Rebates Are:	
	Income	Maximum Rebate
	\$0 to \$8,000	\$650
	\$8,001 to \$15,000	\$500
	\$15,001 to \$18,000	\$300
	\$18,001 to \$35,000	\$250
Renters 	Income	Maximum Rebate
	\$0 to \$8,000	\$650
	\$8,001 to \$15,000	\$500

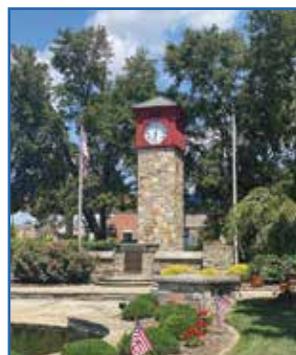
*Applicants exclude one half of all Social Security income.

Hellertown Days

Rep. Robert 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.

His Hellertown office hours for the remainder of 2022 will take place on the following dates:

- October 6
- November 3
- December 1



Lease-to-purchase bill would expand affordable home ownership

To assist families of lesser means in accessing affordable and sustainable home ownership, state Rep. Robert Freeman has introduced legislation (H.B. 2701) to establish the Pennsylvania Lease-to-Purchase Home Ownership Program.

In 2016, the U.S. home ownership rate dropped below 63%, its lowest level since 1965. Access to credit has become increasingly limited, especially for first-time homebuyers. Combined with the impacts of rent and housing prices rising faster than incomes, an inadequate inventory of affordable housing, high levels of student loan debt, and demographic shifts, many people are increasingly locked out of the homeownership market.

“Alternative models are especially needed to ensure that lower-income households have access to affordable and sustainable homeownership. One such model, the lease-

to-purchase mortgage, allows a household to rent a home for a period before taking on a mortgage and ownership of the property. A portion of each month’s rent is set aside in an escrow account to be used to cover the down payment and closing costs. This rental period allows households to build a positive credit history and increase their savings before taking on the responsibility of a mortgage, while at the same time ‘locking in’ lower interest rates and housing prices,” Freeman said.

“Lease-to-purchase programs can also contribute to neighborhood stabilization, providing a means for low-income families to build wealth through equity in their house and by bringing the stability and investment associated with home ownership to neighborhoods experiencing the potential negative side effects associated with a lack of owner-occupied properties.”

Under Freeman’s legislation, the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency would administer a program that would provide for lease-to-purchase agreements to allow the lessee to acquire ownership after 50% of all lease payments have been made. The bill also would include protections for lessor liability, prohibition of contract provisions designed to protect the lessee, and a process for reinstating the agreement should a default occur at some point. Further, at least 30% of program funds would be allocated for lease-to-purchase housing projects that benefit households with incomes that are less than 50% of the median area income.

“This critical measure would help to expand access to affordable home ownership and assist local governments with revitalizing neighborhoods throughout the commonwealth,” Freeman said.

The Mill at Easton offers affordable housing

The long-anticipated affordable housing development, The Mill at Easton, opened its doors on Monday, August 1 at a ribbon-cutting ceremony attended by Rep. Robert Freeman, Mayor Sal Panto, County Executive Lamont McClure, other local officials, development partners, and representatives from organizations that provided funding for the project.

The \$18 million project broke ground in 2020 on the site of the former Stewart Silk Mill complex in south side Easton. Landowner John Robinson and developer Tim Harrison partnered to develop the site. At the ribbon-cutting ceremony, speakers paid tribute to the late John Robinson for his vision and

determination to develop the former industrial site. The new apartment complex is made up of two three-story buildings with a total of 55 units. Families and individuals whose total income is at or equal to 80% of the area’s median income will be eligible to rent an apartment.

“I’m glad that I was able to assist in securing state funding and Affordable Housing Tax Credits for this worthy and much needed project,” Freeman said. “With the rise in housing prices and rising rents, more families and individuals are finding it difficult to obtain affordable housing. The Mill at Easton is an oasis of housing attainability for those in need of affordable housing.”

Other partners in developing the site and providing for the tenants’ needs include PIRHL, which specializes in affordable housing projects, and the Easton Area Neighborhood Center, which will have an office on site to assist residents with community and social services.

The Mill at Easton was awarded Affordable Housing Tax Credits from the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency that generated \$12.8 million in private equity. Additional funding was provided by the City of Easton, Northampton County, and \$2 million came from Pennsylvania’s Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program (RACP).

\$557,358 in state gaming funding awarded for local projects

Rep. Robert Freeman announced that more than a half-million dollars has been allocated to Freemansburg, Hellertown, West Easton and Wilson to help with projects designed to enhance the region’s quality of life.

Receiving state grants are:

- Freemansburg -- \$184,801 for creating an outdoor amphitheater.
- Hellertown -- \$117,457 for police vehicles and equipment upgrades.

- West Easton -- \$155,100 for removal of two dilapidated railroad trestles.
- Wilson -- \$100,000 to help with the construction of a new Meuser pool.

“When gaming was approved in the state, the casinos were required to return a portion of their revenue to the local and neighboring communities to enhance the community and economic well-being,” Freeman said. “This funding will do just that, from helping to safeguard community safety and security

to enhancing and creating more community recreational opportunities.

“I’m glad that I was able to help secure grant funding for these worthy projects in my district,” Freeman said.

The grants are from the Gaming Local Share Account funds allocated for Northampton County and the contiguous counties to Monroe County through the Commonwealth Financing Authority.



Personal Notes...

The 2022-23 Pennsylvania General Fund Budget Targets Important Priorities

Dear Friends,

After extensive negotiations between Governor Wolf and legislative leaders, the legislature passed and the Governor signed into law the 2022-23 Pennsylvania General Fund budget. After previous years of tight budgets and anemic revenue projections as a result of the effects of the Great Recession of 2007-09, an ongoing structural deficit, and the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the state rebounded with strong revenue collections and was assisted by the federal government's American Rescue Plan (ARP) funding in having the resources necessary to address many needs in this year's \$42.8 billion General Fund budget and to establish a solid foundation for future state budgets in the years ahead.

Among the top priorities in the budget was a historic increase in funding for education and increasing funding for basic education by \$750 million above last year's appropriation, an 11.4% increase. That includes \$525 million through the Basic Education Funding Formula and \$225 million in Level Up supplemental funding to help the 100 school districts with the lowest wealth and revenue capacity. The budget also funded increases for a number of important line items, increasing special education funding by \$100 million, school safety and security by \$200 million, increases in early childhood education with an additional \$60 million for Pre-K counts and a \$19 million increase for Head Start.

The increases in education funding are part of a long sought after objective to build greater equity into education financing for our school districts and to ensure that all children receive a solid educational foundation to succeed academically and gain the skills they need to be productive citizens. The added focus on Level Up will improve the condition of our most challenged school districts, giving them the necessary resources to help some of the state's most at-risk children.

In the area of higher education, the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education received an increase of \$75

million, as well as an additional allocation from the American Rescue Plan of \$125 million. Community colleges saw an \$11.3 million increase in operating cost funding, as well as an increase of \$2.1 million for community college capital funding. PHEAA programs, which provide financial aid to college students, saw a \$20.6 million increase in the State Grant Program and over \$23 million in additional student aid funding for targeted grants, scholarships and support programs.

The state budget provided a significant infusion of ARP funding for environmental initiatives as well. This funding will be allocated amongst a number of newly created and existing programs. The newly created Clean Water Procurement and Agriculture Conservation Assistance Programs received funding from the newly established Clean Streams Fund, which provides \$220 million to reduce pollution and improve stream and wetlands conditions and also addresses ongoing nutrient management concerns related to cleaning up the Chesapeake Bay. Funding for much needed water and sewer projects received an infusion of \$320 million, with most of it allocated for the H2O PA Program. These last two initiatives were part of the original Growing Greener III proposal to address environmental needs that I had co-sponsored. Additionally, the budget allocated ARP funds for another newly created program, the State Parks and Outdoor Recreation Program and received a \$100 million allocation. Both the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) and the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) received increases after years of being underfunded. DCNR received an increase of \$6.46 million in State Parks Operations from the General Fund and an additional \$4 million increase from the Oil and Gas Lease Fund for State Parks Operations. DEP received increases of \$1.57 million for Environmental Program Management and \$4.68 million for Environmental Protection Operations. Lastly, DCNR received \$56 million from the Oil and Gas Lease Fund for additional State Parks and Forest Facilities.

The balance of the American Rescue Plan funding that Pennsylvania received from the federal government was allocated to a number of worthy priorities in the budget. All told, Pennsylvania had \$2.2 billion remaining in ARP funds. In addition to some of those funds being allocated for environmental uses, ARP money was used to support long-term care living services, the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), the new Whole-Home Repairs Program to address habitability concerns, the Property Tax/Rent Rebate bonus that you can read more about in this newsletter, local law enforcement and gun violence prevention grants, and support for museums and cultural organizations.

Child care received attention in the budget with the Child Care Stabilization Program which provided funding to qualified child care providers in the form of \$2,500 incentive payments per employee for the recruitment and retention of qualified staff and with the creation of a Pennsylvania Dependent and Child Care Tax Credit for working families. This new Child and Dependent Care Enhancement Program is modeled after the federal Child Care Tax Credit and will allow for state deductions based on child care expenses that filers claim on their federal return. The program is designed to support working families by lessening their tax liability and can be claimed when filing state taxes in 2023 for expenses incurred this year.

All in all, this year's state budget made great strides in addressing real needs for the people of Pennsylvania. Like all budgets, it is not perfect, but it targeted important priorities and made significant increases in the funding of those important priorities. With this budget, a more promising course has been charted for Pennsylvania that should put our commonwealth in a better position than it has been in several years.

Sincerely,

Bob Freeman



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from State Representative
ROBERT FREEMAN

207 Irvis Office Building
P.O. Box 202136
Harrisburg, PA 17120-2136

lpo.kd.0822



Rep. Freeman talks with Rep. Kevin Boyle from Philadelphia in the House chamber during a brief break in the voting session.

Freeman seeks to prevent majority party from avoiding debate on important topics in the House

Concerned about legislative leaders sidestepping debate and preventing votes on important legislative proposals, Rep. Robert Freeman introduced a House resolution that would change House Rules.

“My proposal would reform the discharge resolution process in our House rules to prevent legislative leaders from sidestepping issues that have been bottled up in committee,” Freeman said.

Currently, House rules allow for a discharge resolution to force a bill out of committee and to the House chamber for debate and a vote if it hasn’t received any action for a certain period of time, but legislative leaders play a shell game with bills that are the subject of a discharge resolution by rereferring them from one committee to another committee to avoid having to debate and vote on them.

“This type of parliamentary shenanigans is used to undermine the intent of the discharge resolution process, which is to bring a bill that has been bottled up by the majority party directly to the floor for consideration. My proposal would amend House rules to end this disingenuous practice employed by majority party leaders where they send a bill subject to a discharge resolution to a different committee starting the 15-session day waiting period all over again to block the release of a bill to the House chamber. The re-referral to another committee creates a game of musical chairs that allows the majority party to duck tough but important votes on issues that we should be addressing as a legislative body,” Freeman noted.

Recently, the Republican majority party in the House used the rereferral of a bill subject to a discharge resolution to another committee to delay consideration of four commonsense gun safety proposals.

“To duck a debate and vote to address this important issue in the wake of the tragic shootings in Uvalde, Texas and Buffalo, New York is absolutely shameful,” Freeman said.

Freeman’s H.R. 33 would prevent the sidestepping of a discharge resolution vote by having the discharge apply to any committee that has the bill in its procession.