



YOUR REPORT

from State Representative

ROBERT FREEMAN

Vol. 30, No. 1

Fall 2016

Harrisburg Office: 207 Irvis Office Building • P.O. Box 202136 • Harrisburg, PA 17120-2136 • (717) 783-3815
Constituent Service Office: 215 Northampton St. • Easton, PA 18042 • (610) 253-5543
Webpage: www.pahouse.com/freeman

Making health insurance more affordable

With health insurance rates increasing significantly above the rate of inflation, Rep. Bob Freeman has introduced a bill that would make health insurance more affordable for Pennsylvanians by permitting the State Workers' Insurance Fund to sell health insurance.

The State Workers' Insurance Fund (SWIF) within the Department of Labor and Industry was established by law many years ago to provide a workers' compensation program for Pennsylvania businesses that could not access workers' comp insurance in the private sector.

It currently is only permitted to sell workers' compensation insurance. Freeman's bill would expand its offerings to include health insurance.

"By allowing SWIF to offer health insurance, it would make a quality insurance product available to Pennsylvanians at a lower cost than current rates because of its lower administrative overhead, and it would create more competition within the health insurance market," Freeman said. "In addition, by making this available in the market, it would serve as a yardstick by

which to measure the fairness of rates charged by private health insurance companies.

"I believe that this proposal will effectively bring health care policies back to an affordable range for the average Pennsylvanian. It would offer a less costly alternative to the current private health plans offered today," he added.

Freeman said this new ability would not be an extra cost to taxpayers; the offering would be paid for with premiums from health care subscribers and a loan from SWIF, which would be paid back.

Freeman supports measures to remove undue influence of special interests in government

Concerned about the undue influence of special interests in Harrisburg, Rep. Bob Freeman has signed on to a number of bills that would improve transparency in government and reduce the disproportionate influence special interests have in Pennsylvania politics.

"There is a genuine concern that special interests hold too much influence over the political process and that's why state government cannot get things done," Freeman said. "I think that is a legitimate concern and why I felt it was important to support these bills – to improve government and help erase those perceptions."

Freeman has co-sponsored bills that would:

- Limit campaign contributions and require shareholder approval of campaign contributions by a corporation's political action committee (H.B. 1980);
- Require bidders for public contracts to disclose campaign contributions (H.B. 1977); and
- Require full disclosure of funding sources for unaffiliated "issue ads" (H.B. 1982) and for issue ads advocating for or against specific candidates (H.B. 1695).

"With these changes to the law, voters will have a better chance of identifying the influence of special interest money and campaigns and knowing which candidates are beholden to such interests."



Collin Raysor was an intern in Rep. Freeman's district office this summer. A junior at Lafayette College, he spent the summer helping address constituent problems and inquiries. He recently traveled to the state Capitol for an inside look at what happens in Harrisburg. From left: House Speaker Mike Turzai, Raysor and Freeman.

INSIDE:

Freeman bill would encourage new life for old industrial buildings.....pg. 2
 House rejects plan to study commercialization of state parkspg. 2
 House passes bill expanding PACENET coverage.....pg. 2
 Freeman bill would require vehicle make, model and year on registrationpg. 2
 Personal Notes: An on-time budget for Pennsylvaniapg. 3
 Nearly \$4 million in state funding comes to the 136th.....pg. 4

Freeman bill would require vehicle make, model and year on registration

Rep. Bob Freeman has introduced a bill that would require vehicle registration information in the Transportation Department's database to include more information about the titled vehicle.

Freeman said the bill was suggested by an Easton police officer.

"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."

Freeman bill would encourage new life for old industrial buildings

Rep. Bob Freeman has introduced legislation that would establish tax incentives to promote the redevelopment and reuse of vacant factory or mill buildings in Pennsylvania.

"Adaptive reuse, or using a building for a purpose other than which it was intended, is a way to reuse buildings that have stood in our communities for decades. Repurposing an old factory or mill for retail, office or arts space, or transforming them into dwellings, encourages economic development and improves the quality of life for a community," Freeman said.

"Some of these buildings have withstood the test of time for more than 100 years. They might be vacant, but they are solid structures that can be revitalized for reuse. 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."

Freeman said adaptive reuse isn't a new concept and pointed to the number of old industrial buildings around the Lehigh Valley that have been repurposed. Locally, he said the Simon Silk Mill complex on 13th Street in Easton is a project in the works that could benefit from his legislation.

"The earliest buildings in the 14-acre Silk Mill complex were built in 1883. They're part of our history and once they are redeveloped, they can be part of Easton's bright future," he said.

The bill would establish three types of tax incentive programs:

- A 25-percent tax credit for rehabilitation and reconstruction costs incurred by the owner;
- 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.

House rejects plan to study commercialization of state parks

In June, the House considered a measure that would have called on the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources to investigate entering into public-private partnerships to provide "additional recreational activities" within Pennsylvania's 121 state parks.

House Bill 2013 was defeated in a 77-123 House vote. However, a procedural maneuver makes it possible for the House to reconsider the bill at a later time.

Rep. Bob Freeman voted against this bill and remains opposed to potentially opening state parks to private developers for golf courses, hotels, water parks, restaurants, office buildings and amusement parks. Under the proposal, the "additional recreational activities" could be built within the state parks, and not just abutting them.

"This legislation takes us down the wrong road," Freeman said. "Not every public asset needs to be commercialized or developed or privatized."

"The great gift of our state park system is that it preserves the natural environment of our commonwealth. It's a public asset that needs to be preserved and maintained for future generations. The natural resources of our state, which the Constitution of the Commonwealth calls 'the common property of all the people, including generations yet to come,' are some of our most valuable assets. Let's keep one portion of Pennsylvania the way it was meant to be."



House passes bill expanding PACENET coverage for seniors

Rep. Bob Freeman is a co-sponsor of a bill that would expand the state's PACENET program, providing 32,000 more senior citizens with access to affordable prescription medications.

The bill, which passed the House in June, would increase the maximum income limits for the state's Pharmaceutical Assistance

Continued page 4...



Personal Notes...

By Rep. Bob Freeman

An On-Time Budget for Pennsylvania

Dear Friends,

Last year's budget impasse was a long and protracted battle between Gov. Tom Wolf and the Republican-controlled legislature. Much of the impasse was the result of the intense polarization that has taken place in politics. This polarization has resulted in two diametrically opposed and mutually exclusive views of what priorities the state budget should take and how to approach the Commonwealth's finances. Although a 2015-16 budget was finally passed at the beginning of this year, the inability to strike a compromise for such an unprecedented stretch of time left all parties eager to wrap up the 2016-17 budget in a timely fashion.

As a result, the legislature passed and the governor signed into law the state budget on time in June. Although the revenue package and other budget-related bills, such as the Fiscal Code bill and the Education Code bill, took a little longer to be enacted, the budget was nevertheless passed on time. As a result, school districts didn't have to borrow money or face closing down, human services programs were able to continue to provide services without facing a possible interruption, and college students were able to secure financial aid.

This year's budget was not perfect, but it did make some important strides in restoring funding in key areas that had been severely cut under the Corbett Administration. There is an increase in school funding of \$250 million, including a \$25 million increase in pre-K programs, and \$20 million more in special education funding. This doesn't entirely make up for the \$1 billion in cuts to education made by the previous administration, as funding for basic education is still less than school districts received in 2010-11, but it does provide a much-needed infusion of funds for education in our state.

Higher education received a boost of \$40 million, which benefits state-owned, state-related, and community colleges, as well as universities across the state. And there is also a 2.5% increase in PHEAA financial aid for students in this year's budget. Overall, the budget significantly improved funding for education in Pennsylvania.

Significant new funding was also provided to reduce waiting lists for home and community-based services, to enable senior citizens to stay in their own homes and to help adults with intellectual disabilities to stay in their communities. A real commitment was also made to address opioid abuse and addiction by providing \$15 million to expand Pennsylvania's fight against this horrible drug epidemic sweeping across our state.

This year's budget also avoided a broad-based tax increase as the state's Personal Income Tax and state's sales tax remain the same as last year. However, tobacco taxes were increased, lottery winnings of over \$600 are now subject to the state income tax, a host of adjustments were made to other elements of the tax code, and a tax amnesty program and modernization of the liquor system in Pennsylvania are expected to generate more revenue. Additionally, the legislature is expected to take up legislation in the fall session that would expand gambling, in anticipation of raising the remaining revenue needed to balance the budget.

While the lack of a broad-based tax increase may be good news for taxpayers, it does leave unaddressed the looming structural deficit that handicaps the state budget every fiscal year. That structural deficit will eventually have to be addressed in order to put our state's financial house on a sounder fiscal footing and to shore up the state's sagging bond rating. I also have concerns that many of the items included in this year's revenue package will not raise the revenue anticipated. This is particularly true in regard to the expansion of gambling, which has some negative societal implications, as well. I am not convinced that the type of gambling activities envisioned, such as legalizing online gambling, are in the best interests of the people of Pennsylvania.

Although this year's budget process left a number of important considerations unresolved, hopefully the spirit of cooperation and the willingness to make pragmatic compromises on elements of the budget will continue to serve as a roadmap for passing state budgets on time in the future. Both Harrisburg and Washington could use a good infusion of pragmatic policymaking to address the many challenges that we face as a state and as a nation, and to ensure a more promising and sustainable future for all of us.

Sincerely,

Bob Freeman





YOUR REPORT
from State Representative
ROBERT FREEMAN

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

lpo.kaf.0816

Nearly \$4 million in state funding comes to the 136th House District

State Rep. Robert Freeman said Easton, Hellertown and Williams Township are benefitting from a share in \$3.96 million in state funding awarded to the district.

“This funding is great news for Lafayette College, the city of Easton and the Easton Area School District, Hellertown and Williams Township,” Freeman said. “Through these grants, these entities can move forward on important projects for the region – projects that are designed to enhance safety or protect the environment and in the process, generate jobs.”

- Lafayette College in Easton will receive \$1.1 million for its travelways improvement plan from the state’s Multimodal Transportation Fund, which provides grants to enhance communities, improve pedestrian safety and boost transit revitalization.
- Easton will receive \$128,697 to improve pedestrian walkability and bicycle safety along the 13th Street corridor from the Multimodal fund; and \$250,000 from the state’s Greenways, Trails and Recreation Program to erect a pedestrian bridge on the 2.5-mile Karl Stirner Arts Trail to connect the trail to the Simon Silk Mill. The greenways program promotes greenways, recreational space, open space, trails, parks and river conservation.
- The Easton Area School District will receive \$2 million to renovate the kindergarten through fifth grade Paxinosa Elementary School into a high-performance building, complete with LED lighting, lighting occupancy sensors, low-flow water fixtures and high-efficiency water heaters, air handlers, chiller and condensing boilers. After this renovation, an estimated \$20 million project, the school should have an energy savings of 2,000 mmBtu and have a LEED gold rating. These funds came from the High Performance Building Program, which helps underwrite the cost associated with the design and construction or renovation of high-performance buildings in the state.
- Williams Township will receive \$35,000 to purchase and install a diesel-powered generator at the public works building so the facility can serve as an emergency management operations center.
- Hellertown will use its \$435,000 grant to build a multi-use bike lane trail, with “share the road” signs, bump outs, pavement markings and curb cuts along Water Street. This and the Williams Township project were made possible from the local share assessment account, which is generated by licensed gaming facilities to support community and economic development projects.

Expanding PACENET coverage for seniors

... *Continued from page 2*

Contract for the Elderly Needs Enhancement Tier from \$23,500 to \$31,000 for a single person and from \$31,500 to \$41,000 for a married couple.

“PACE and PACENET are very valuable programs for seniors on fixed incomes,” Freeman said. “But as the cost of living increases, the most effective way to help seniors is by increasing eligibility requirements, and that’s what this bill does.”

“I’m optimistic the Senate will follow the House’s lead so we can send this bill to the governor for his signature.”

The last time income limits were adjusted was in 2003; however, laws, known as COLA moratoriums, have been enacted periodically since 2008 to help seniors keep their prescription drug coverage. The laws keep Social Security cost-of-living adjustments from being counted as income and prevent many seniors from being pushed out of the program. The current moratorium was enacted in 2015 and is due to expire at the end of 2017.

For more information or assistance with applying for PACE or PACENET, contact Freeman’s office at 215 Northampton St., Easton, or 610-253-5543.