

Senator Dominic Pileggi



REPORT to the PEOPLE

9TH SENATORIAL DISTRICT • WINTER 2009



2009-10 Budget Preview

Because of the weak economy both nationally and in Pennsylvania, the 2009-10 state budget is shaping up to be the most difficult budget since at least 1991. Governor Rendell recently announced that he expects the state's deficit to reach \$2.3 billion by the end of June, when the fiscal year comes to a close.

Tax collections to date are about 7 percent less than the Governor and his budget secretary expected when the budget was signed into law last July. Nearly every category is running below estimates: the personal income tax, the sales tax, business taxes and the realty transfer tax are all down significantly.

What this means is some very difficult choices will be made during the 2009-10 budget process.

The current deficit also impacts next year's budget, since any growth in revenues would build on a much smaller base. In fact, the Governor has said that he does not anticipate any revenue growth in 2009-10.

Pennsylvania is better positioned to weather this economic storm than many other states are, because last year the Senate led an effort to protect our Rainy Day Fund. That fund includes approximately \$750 million intended to help solve budget shortfalls. In addition, some money is expected to be received from the federal stimulus program working its way through Congress. However, those are one-time solutions that will not sustain future spending.

The decisions we make in this budget process will impact Pennsylvania families and the state's economy for many years to come. During the last budget crisis in 1991, some big policy mistakes were made – primarily tax increases – and in some ways, Pennsylvania is still recovering from those mistakes.

My objective is to close this deficit without tax increases. Working with the Governor and the House, we must tighten the state's spending belt and increase the efficiency of government operations.

I would like to hear what you think about our budget problems. Please share your thoughts by sending an email to dpileggi@pasen.gov or by contacting one of my offices. The contact information is on the opposite side of this newsletter.

Sincerely,

DOMINIC PILEGGI

Expanding Access to Health Care

Especially with unemployment on the rise, the cost of health care is an increasing worry for many families. Senator Pileggi supports a package of legislation known as HealthNET PA, which would expand access to health care and medicine to 507,000 uninsured and low-income working Pennsylvanians in a very cost-efficient way.

One of the cornerstones of HealthNET PA is the Community-Based Health Care Program, which would expand and develop health care clinics across Pennsylvania to provide "medical homes" for 175,000 working poor clients and ease pressure on hospital emergency rooms. It would also implement a physician/health care facility volunteer program through which an additional 159,000 uninsured patients would be assigned to a primary or specialty care physician, with access to free specialty care, labs and inpatient hospital care.

Help for Those in Need

The ongoing economic crisis has caused difficulties for many families. The state has established a website, www.heretohelp.pa.gov, to connect people with programs that can help get them through tough times. The site includes information on:

- Unemployment benefits.
- Heating assistance.
- Assistance with your utility bill.
- Job search and job training resources.
- Mortgage assistance.
- Low-cost and no-cost health insurance.
- Veterans' services.
- And much more.

In January, Senator Pileggi announced the introduction of a 10-bill package of reforms intended to bring greater accountability and transparency to state government. More information is available at senatorpileggi.com.



New Laws Protect Health, Environment, and More

In addition to the new Open Records Law (see below), several significant laws were passed by the legislature and signed by the Governor in 2008. Here are some of the highlights:

The Clean Indoor Air Act prohibits smoking in most public places and workplaces.

The Alternative Energy Investment Act created a \$650 million fund to boost renewable energy development and reduce energy consumption in Pennsylvania without imposing new taxes. A companion bill expands the state Alternative Fuels Incentive Fund to encourage the use of energy-efficient alternative fuels.

The H2O PA program authorized \$800 million for

critical water and sewer projects and other infrastructure needs, funded from existing revenues. A companion bill asked voters to approve an additional \$400 million for water and sewer improvements, which they did.

Act 119 sets higher standards for commercial dog kennels in Pennsylvania, significantly improving the conditions for the dogs living in these kennels.

Act 69 prevented PACE and PACENET enrollees from losing prescription benefits due to Social Security cost-of-living adjustments.

Act 66 created a \$100 tax credit for active volunteer firefighters and EMS workers.

Act 62 gave the state appropriate regulatory authority over the proposed merger of Highmark and Independence Blue Cross,

and also required insurers to provide coverage of autism services and colorectal cancer screenings.

The Pennsylvania Climate Change Act creates an advisory group to make recommendations regarding climate change issues and identify "green" economic opportunities in Pennsylvania.

Four new laws targeted predatory and other questionable mortgage lending practices in Pennsylvania: Acts 57, 58, 59, and 60.

Act 102 prohibited mandatory overtime for nurses, a change which will improve patient safety.

Act 14 established a cancer drug repository in Pennsylvania to help uninsured patients and those in need gain access to safe, unused cancer medications.

Political Robo-Calls

Senator Pileggi has introduced legislation to allow Pennsylvanians to stop receiving political robo-calls.

"In the days leading up to the presidential election, some people reported receiving five or more pre-recorded robo-calls every day," said Senator Pileggi. "People should be able to tell candidates and political organizations that they do not want to receive these calls."

Senate Bill 34 would establish a separate Do-Not-Call List for automated political calls, known as robo-calls. The first list would be in use by September 15, 2009, in time for this fall's election season. Offenders would be subject to penalties of up to \$1,000 per violation.

A Strong Open Records Law for Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania's new Open Records Law, which Senator Pileggi sponsored, is now in effect as Act 3 of 2008. This law governs access to government records, and Act 3 was written to make it easier for the public to review those records.

The new Office of Open Records, created by Act 3, has established a website packed with useful information for anyone who wants to request records or is denied access to records. It can be found at openrecords.state.pa.us. The Senate has posted information about the new law at www.pasen.gov/RTKL.

An often overlooked part of the new law created an online, searchable database of all state contracts worth \$5,000 or more. The database, at contracts.patreasury.org, is a great resource for people who want to keep closer tabs on how your government is spending money and for business owners who would like to compete for state contracts.

Newsletters by Email

If you want to receive these newsletters via email rather than postal mail, contact me at dpileggi@pasen.gov or call my office at (610) 358-5183.



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