

State Senator
MARY JO WHITE



Reports to You

21ST DISTRICT • FALL 2005

A MESSAGE FROM SENATOR MARY JO WHITE

Well, we spent another July 4th in Harrisburg. I managed to see some fireworks through the windows of the Senate chamber, but the real fireworks were going on behind the scenes. The pay raise passed both houses with a narrow majority. I voted against it and did not accept the unvouchered expense money. While I believe most legislators work hard and probably deserve a pay raise, the same could be said of many Pennsylvanians who will not see raises of that magnitude this year.

There were some positive developments. We managed to head off a tax increase to pay for Growing Greener and we were able to adopt the implementing legislation for the voter approved bond issue before summer recess. We dodged the bullet on medical assistance funding, largely because of improved revenues; however, this issue will not go away in the short term.

I have received some new and challenging assignments. I have been appointed chair of the Senate Committee on Ethics and Official Conduct. Also, I am the Senate's representative on the Interbranch Commission, a group charged with implementing many of the recommendations of a study on gender, ethnic and racial disparities in our courts. The Superior Court of Pennsylvania recently sat in special session in Franklin to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the Venango County court. Attorneys, school students and the public were able to watch appellate arguments on a number of regional cases. Chief Justice Ralph Cappy gave an address to the bar as part of the celebration.

In May I was privileged to receive an honorary Doctor of Public Service degree from Clarion University of Pennsylvania and to deliver the commencement address to the graduates. I am currently serving on the Board of Trustees of the University of Pittsburgh. We are blessed to have so many fine

institutions of higher learning, public and private, in our Commonwealth. They provide economic benefits as well as academic ones.

I visited several Relays for Life around the district this summer. These 24-hour events highlight the fight against cancer, raising money and spirits as survivors celebrate life. I recently toured the new Bioscience Medical Tower at Pitt where cutting edge research is attracting international talent to the region and raising hope for serious breakthroughs.

My apple pie for the WBUT celebrity pie charity auction sold for fifty dollars! Of course, they bid on it before they tasted it. Butler recently dedicated the new "Under Our Wing" assisted living facility adjacent to the YWCA. This project involved many levels of government, community organizations and private donors. Spearheading the project were Margaret Clawson of the "Y" and Perry O'Malley of the Butler housing authority. Well done!

Clarion County was named one of the country's 100 best places in the nation to raise children by America's Promise, a national youth alliance founded by retired General Colin Powell. The area drew particular praise for its four family centers which break down rural isolation and get services out to small communities. A network of churches, schools, businesses, social service agencies and volunteers is making a difference in the lives of our youngest citizens.

If you are out enjoying the fall foliage, stop and see the beautiful murals at the Warren Visitor Center and in Venango County courtroom No. 1. The first depicts landmarks and outdoor resources of the Warren area and the second commemorates George Washington's visit to Franklin in 1753. Have a great fall.

Mary Jo

White Opposes Verizon-MCI Merger

I have intervened in the proceeding before the State Public Utility Commission (PUC) concerning the proposed merger of Verizon and MCI. My participation allows me to advocate on behalf of my constituents and to present information on the quality of phone and Internet service in our area. The law is clear that to approve such a merger, the PUC must find that it is in the public interest.

I requested a public hearing on the issue, and it was held at Edinboro University in Erie County. Many constituents expressed concern over the quality of their telephone service, and the lack of access to affordable broadband internet connections.

Sen. Jane Earll (R-Erie) testified that she was concerned that jobs would be lost in Pennsylvania as a result of the merger. Representative Kathy Rapp attended the hearing to listen to the concerns expressed.

We need more competition in telecommunications, not less. If the PUC approves the merger, I believe it should require a binding commitment from Verizon/MCI to accelerate rural broadband deployment, aggressively compete for mass market customers and retain current levels of employment in Pennsylvania. As presently stated, this merger may be good for Wall Street, but it offers no benefits to Main Street.



It was a real joy to deliver the commencement address to graduates of Clarion University in May. I also received an honorary Doctor of Public Service degree.

SPECIAL SESSION ON PROPERTY TAXES

Everyone agrees that property taxes are too high and that we need to broaden the tax base of our education system. After that things get murky. How do we replace that \$8.3 billion dollars in school funding? In preparation for the special session, our caucus spent an entire day reviewing almost a dozen different plans that have been proposed. At the opening of the special session, Governor Rendell asked the legislature to simply mandate that all school districts opt into Act 72, which accesses gambling dollars, and eliminates the requirement for a small personal income tax increase. I don't think it's as simple as that. As we proceed I will try to keep an open mind and try to accept a consensus plan, but I do not believe the gambling revenues are the answer. For one thing, they are too far down the road. I do not expect to see real gambling money until 2007 at the earliest and **citizens want meaningful property tax relief before then.**

It is too soon to say what the final product will look like, but I am encouraged by the apparent resolve of both the House and Senate to solve this 30-year-old problem in such a way that we do not have to deal with it again.

Installment Payments For Taxes

Paying **school taxes** in a lump sum annually can be difficult for people on tight budgets. Allowing taxpayers to make smaller payments periodically may help to make the tax burden more manageable, which is why I've co-sponsored Senate Bill 709. If passed, this legislation will require school districts statewide to initiate installment payment plans by the 2006-07 school year. School districts would have the option to offer either quarterly, bimonthly or monthly payments to their residents. Discounts on taxes

paid early would also continue to be offered.

The Senate also approved legislation I co-sponsored to change the manner in which municipalities may collect the annual **Emergency and Municipal Services Tax.**

Among the changes, Senate Bill 157 would require the tax to be billed quarterly rather than all at once, and makes it clear that anyone making less than \$12,000 a year is exempt from the tax. Both of these bills were approved by the Senate and sent to the House of Representatives for consideration.

City Retirees Can Collect Pension, Serve Public

Many communities are struggling to find persons willing to serve in local government leadership positions. The pay is small and the challenges large, but there can be great satisfaction in such work.

Everyone was surprised when an Auditor General report determined that popular Franklin Mayor, Bob Heller, a city retiree, could not continue to serve and receive his pension. The pay for the position was only \$2,400 per year, which he was willing to give up. The law did not allow this and he was forced to resign. I introduced Senate Bill 457 which gives elected officials in that posi-

tion the option of **declining a salary so that they can serve in office** without jeopardizing their pensions.

This legislation would apply to cities of the third class, which include Franklin and Oil City (Venango County), Butler (Butler County), Corry (Erie County), and Warren (Warren County). It would be a shame to lose the services of experienced and talented volunteers in local government because of a "glitch" in the law.

The governor signed the bill July 5. It is Act 28 of 2005. Thanks to Representative Scott Hutchinson for his help in the House of Representatives.

Senate Passes Legislation To Prohibit Price Gouging

Disasters and emergencies usually bring out the best in citizens and businesses as people band together to help their neighbors, whether it is through large acts of heroism or small acts of charity. Unfortunately there are exceptions, where persons will seek to exploit a crisis by engaging in price gouging for desperately needed commodities. I

introduced a price gouging bill in past sessions but it did not receive much attention. After Hurricane Katrina and rapidly escalating gasoline prices, however, the bill attracted broad bipartisan support and quickly passed the Senate. Senate Bill 450 would **prohibit unconscionably excessive pricing during a state of emergency** and for 30 days thereafter. The bill received

considerable input from Attorney General Tom Corbett's office and it will give the Attorney General's Office of Consumer Protection broad authority to investigate and to impose civil penalties of up to \$10,000 per violation.

High Heating Costs

The cost of heating a home is likely to go up by 30 percent this winter. Many of my constituents may not have the financial resources to afford this increase.

If you are concerned about how you will pay your heating bills, call your local gas or oil company now and ask about budget billing. If you are on a fixed or low income, ask about setting up a payment arrangement based on your ability to pay. Call your county assistance office and find out if you meet the income guidelines for LIHEAP and then sign up for the program in November.

I have cosponsored a bill to expand the LIHEAP program this year by dedicating \$80 million dollars in state funds to supplement the federal appropriation.

Medicare Drug Benefit Enrollment

Enrollment for the federal prescription drug benefit offered by Medicare opens on Nov. 15, with coverage beginning on Jan. 1, 2006.

For help, older Pennsylvanians can contact the state's APPRISE assistance volunteers toll-free, at **1-800-783-7067**. For additional information about this Medicare Part D drug benefit implementation, visit Medicare on the Web at www.medicare.gov.

Environmental Funding Approved; Tax Hike Rejected

Legislation to implement the \$625 million environmental bond approved by voters in May was passed by the General Assembly, without the tax increases sought by the governor.

The legislation authorizes the Commonwealth to borrow \$625 million over six years for a variety of environmental and conservation programs collectively known as "Growing Greener." It provides funding for a host of important needs - **acid mine drainage abatement, mine reclamation, oil and gas well plugging, parks and recreation, open space and farmland preservation and State park and forest improvements.**

I chair the Senate Environmental Resources and Energy Committee and worked to add a key provision creating an innovative County Environmental Initiative program. Under this program, each county will be able to des-

ignate at least \$1 million in priority projects to be funded from bond proceeds. The actual amount for each county was determined by the county's class as designated under state law.

It's based on a simple proposition: that local communities – not Harrisburg – should be able to establish priorities for some of this funding, and that the money should be equitably distributed across the Commonwealth. This legislation does so without increasing the tax burden on hard working Pennsylvanians.

Debt service on the bond will be paid by using a portion of the

existing \$4.25/ton fee charged for waste disposal at landfills. Last year Governor Rendell proposed increasing taxes on households and businesses by nearly \$150 million annually to pay debt service and fund other projects. Senate Republicans rejected the governor's proposal.

Supporting Slippery Rock University's PCEE

I am pleased to report that the effort to strengthen the Pennsylvania Center for Environmental Education at Slippery Rock University has progressed on two fronts.



First, the Senate restored \$350,000 in funding that had been cut from PCEE, which serves as a statewide **environmental education resource for state agencies, county conservation districts, educators and nonprofit organizations.**

Further, while the PCEE was established by Executive Order in 1996, the Senate again has approved legislation I sponsored to establish the PCEE in statute, strengthening its status among state programs and ensuring more stable funding. In my previous newsletter I noted that similar legislation was approved by the Senate last year. However, that bill did not reach a vote in the House of Representatives.

The State Board of Education has adopted environment and ecology curriculum standards that students in kindergarten through grade 12 must attain at each level, and the PCEE is an important teaching aid. It makes learning tools available to teachers, home-school parents and students via the Internet and newsletters. It's an excellent resource and it says a lot about Slippery Rock University that the PCEE has come so far.

E-MAIL NEWSLETTERS

Would you like to receive these newsletters via e-mail, rather than postal mail?

Just e-mail me at mwhite@pasen.gov and we'll make sure these newsletters arrive in your computer, not your mailbox.

Drop me a line and let me know which is more convenient.



Photo courtesy of Bethany Boarts.

Artist Bill Secunda made this amazing gorilla sculpture out of nails for the Associated Artists of Butler County's exhibit, "Art 24: All art, all night, all day" in September.

White Bill Designates "Gen. Richard Butler Bridge"

General Richard Butler served with George Washington at Valley Forge and was involved in the battles of Saratoga, Yorktown and Monmouth. The City of Butler and Butler County bear his name.

Now, his name will also be found on the Main Street Bridge in Butler. Legislation I sponsored to designate the bridge as the "General Richard Butler Bridge" was signed into law in June.

Many motorists use this bridge, and the new designation will help remind citizens of **the significant role General Richard Butler played in the birth of our nation and development of our region.**

Before he was killed in 1791 during the Battle of Miami (Ohio), General Butler served as a judge of the Court of Common Pleas of Allegheny County and was instrumental in establishing Allegheny County as a separate political entity from Westmoreland County. When Allegheny County was divided in 1800, the area north of Pittsburgh was named Butler County in honor of the general.

Thanks to history buff, Judge Martin O'Brien, for the suggestion.

White Legislation to Encourage Development of Oil and Gas Approved

Pennsylvania has a rich tradition as the pioneer state in oil and gas production. The world's first oil lease was filed in the Venango County courthouse. Today, oil and gas producers who want to purchase or lease oil and gas property interests for development sometimes find that title to the estate is incomplete or uncertain. This is particularly true where an estate has gone through several generations of a family.

Producers are unwilling to risk capital in the development of oil and gas resources if they are unable to obtain consent from all royalty owners. Usually, it is a very small interest that

cannot be located and valuable PA *oil and gas resources lie dormant as a result.*

I introduced Senate Bill 594 which would allow the Court of Common Pleas to establish trusts to protect an

unknown or unfound owner's interest. The bill has passed the Senate and, if it finally becomes law, will remove these obstacles to development, protect rights of owners, contribute to job creation and produce valuable energy resources.



I was honored to meet with two brave Butler residents recently wounded in Iraq. Sgt. Paul Statzer (second from left) and Sgt. Chad M. Barnhart of Company A, 1-112th Infantry out of Ford City, were both injured from an improvised explosive attack near Tikrit, Iraq on March 29. These Purple Heart recipients were in Harrisburg with Adjutant General Jessica Wright (right) and Senator Bob Robbins for National Guard Day.

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White Co-Sponsors Government Reform Measure

I was pleased that the Senate approved a measure I co-sponsored to give the public a complete and clear accounting of lobbying activity in Pennsylvania.

Senate Bill 1 establishes an obligation to **disclose who is working on what legislation and how much is being spent to advocate those positions.** Its passage was a top legislative

priority for Senate Republicans.

The "Lobbying Accountability Act" would shed more light on the scope and nature of lobbyists' work in Pennsylvania by requiring lobbyists and principals to register every two years and to report their spending four times a year. Hopefully, the House of Representatives will follow the Senate in approving this reform measure.

New Warren Office Open

We have opened a new district office in Warren County to serve residents of the 21st Senatorial district who live in Warren and Erie counties. It is at **2883 Pennsylvania Avenue West** in the Northern Alleghenies Vacation Region Building. My new part-time legislative representative for the area is Ron Bosworth, retired manager of Youngsville Borough. You can call him at **814-728-2100**. Stop by and say hello when you are checking out the mural.