



25th District • Summer 2006

State Senator JOE SCARNATI



Reports to You

Dear Friend,

This mailing discusses some of the key issues confronting the state legislature this year.

Complex issues such as raising the minimum wage while protecting small businesses, providing property tax relief to homeowners, reforming state government and increasing penalties for child sexual predators have all been at the forefront of legislative debate in 2006.

I am pleased to announce that we are raising the minimum wage, we are reforming state government and we are providing property tax relief to low-income seniors. We have also passed legislation in the Senate that will increase penalties for child sexual predators.

In the months to come, one of my top priorities will be searching for ways to make state government more efficient and conservative.

During the primary election, Commonwealth taxpayers sent a clear message to Harrisburg calling for reforms in state government. I intend to lead the effort to change the way we do business, making state government more fiscally conservative and responsible.

If you have any questions regarding the issues addressed in this mailing or any state government questions, please contact one of my offices.

Sincerely,

Joe Scarnati

State Senate Enacts Reforms

Following the public's reaction to the pay raise, it was clear to me that Pennsylvanians wanted reform to make the legislature more fiscally conservative and responsible. I have been pressing leadership to change the way we do business in Harrisburg, and I am pleased to report that things are moving in the right direction.

Beginning on August 1, Senators will no longer be able to lease cars from private dealerships for up to \$600 a month. This measure will prevent members from leasing luxury vehicles. Members will be given the option of leasing more affordable state fleet vehicles or using their own personal vehicles and collecting mileage reimbursements. While I never leased a vehicle - nor do I support leasing vehicles to members - I strongly believe this is a step in the right direction.

Also, as of September, Senators and Senate staffers will be required to pay a portion of their salary for health insurance benefits. This is a groundbreaking step for Pennsylvania's Legislature, and I am proud that the Senate is leading the movement for responsible state government.

Reform in Harrisburg is long overdue, and I intend to continue leading the push for good government policies that reduce taxpayer-funded perks.



Senator Scarnati presented Penn State Public Broadcasting Board Member Julie Cleland (center) with the Mr. Rogers Award - which is given by the Pennsylvania Public Television Network. Also in attendance was Joanne Rogers (left), the widow of the late Fred Rogers who starred in the PBS show *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*.

State Budget Spending Too High

I was highly disappointed by the Governor and some of my colleagues following the passage of the 2006-07 State Budget, which resulted in a 7 percent spending increase - or \$1.5 billion - over last year's budget.

While I am pleased that the budget restores and increases funding for Disabled Veterans

Transportation, the Civil Air Patrol, Basic and Higher Education and other important line items that the Governor cut from his proposal, the spending in this year's budget is too excessive. Commonwealth citizens deserved a more conservative, sensible and responsible budget.

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Property Tax Relief Aids Seniors

Rising property taxes are a concern for all homeowners, but particularly for seniors on a low or fixed income. I've been working with my colleagues to craft a tax reform law that will provide for substantial reductions in property taxes for all homeowners within the next year.

The Pennsylvania Taxpayer Relief Act will do that by expanding the Property Tax and Rent Rebate Program. It increases rebate payments for seniors by \$200 million and adds over 400,000 new claimants to the program.

The new law gives taxpayers in each school district the option to increase the Earned Income Tax (EIT) rate in exchange for a reduction in

their property taxes through a referendum question on the Spring 2007 ballot.

Under the law, the minimum property tax reduction offered in the referendum will be at least 50 percent of the maximum homestead exclusion. This would mean real savings to Pennsylvania families. In this senatorial district, the average property taxpayer will see a 27.3% reduction in property taxes if the local referenda are approved.

Additionally, voters in each district will have the authority to vote "yes" or "no" on any school property tax increase that exceeds the rate of inflation.

Unlike other plans that sought to

increase the state personal income tax or increase the sales tax, this law gives local communities the first word in determining whether to switch to a new school tax system and the last word in deciding on future property tax increases.

The Pennsylvania Taxpayer Relief Act's Four Major Benefits to Taxpayers:

- It doubles the size of the Property Tax and Rent Rebate Program for low-income seniors in Pennsylvania.
- It provides the opportunity for significant school real estate tax relief.
- It implements the backend referendum – voter controls on future property tax increases – to give taxpayers the final say.
- It allows voters in a school district to vote to switch from a property tax to an earned income tax.

Individuals who qualify for a rebate under the new guidelines can sign up now to have a Property Tax/Rent Rebate claim form mailed to them when the forms are available in early 2007. District residents can sign up by calling toll-free 1-888-222-9190 weekdays between 7:30 a.m. and 5:30 p.m., or by visiting www.papropertytaxrelief.com.

Individuals who qualified for a rebate in 2005 will automatically receive a form for next year's program and do not need to sign up for the mailing.

Property Tax Rent Rebate claim forms and assistance are available at my district offices or online through the state Revenue Department's website, www.revenue.state.pa.us.

2006 Senior Expo



Senator Scarnati recently hosted his annual Senior Citizen Expo. This year's event, held at Brockway High School, featured the latest medical information, including free financial consultations and health screenings. More than 300 people and 40 vendors attended the free event which also included door prizes and refreshments.

Legislation Targets Child Sexual Predators

I was very pleased that the State Senate recently approved legislation I co-sponsored to impose a mandatory minimum sentence of 25 years for convicted child molesters and require them to wear an electronic monitoring device for life.

"Jessica's Law" is named for Jessica Lunsford, a 9-year-old Florida girl who was kidnapped and murdered by a convicted sex offender.

Senate Bill 944 would impose a minimum of 25 years in prison for anyone over 18 years of age who is convicted of sexually assaulting a child under the age of 13, mandatory GPS monitoring for life, and lifetime imprisonment for a second conviction.

A forfeiture section was also added to Senate Bill 944 that would allow the courts to seize property or assets linked to the commission of the crime. Assets would be used to

offset the daily cost of monitoring sexual offenders.

The bill provides additional penalties for anyone convicted of knowingly harboring or aiding a sex offender who has failed to register under Megan's Law. It also enhances the current Megan's Law website and offender reporting requirements by mandating more specific residence information and reducing the time permitted for an offender to register after his or her release or relocation.

"Jessica's Law" sends a strong and simple message to child predators: Harming a child will place you behind bars for a long time, and you will lose your freedom for life. It is our hope that other states will join in a national effort to support this legislation.

In addition to "Jessica's Law," the Senate also unanimously passed

Senate Bill 1054. I co-sponsored this legislation which strengthens the already existing "Megan's Law" by making sexual offenders' names and specific addresses available to the general public. Currently under Megan's Law, sexual predators merely register the county, town and zip code in which they live.

These important pieces of legislation will make our communities safer by removing the personal freedoms of child sexual predators and making their presence known in order to protect our children from harm.

According to the Pennsylvania State Police, there are over 7,100 registered sex offenders in the state. Last year, sexual assault centers around the Commonwealth served approximately 38,000 people, nearly a third of whom were children. Children under 12 account for 34 percent of all sexual assaults.

Job Training Fund Rewards Local Education Centers

Each year the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry awards grants to entities in specified rural counties which run workforce education programs and provide services for job training assistance to incumbent workers and dislocated workers.

The Job Training Fund Equipment Grants are intended to stimulate Pennsylvania's workforce, giving the Commonwealth a leading edge through workforce development programs. The grants provide training for high-skilled, high-wage jobs, making Pennsylvania more competitive.

The following educational centers received funding over the course of the 2005-06 fiscal year:

Jefferson County-DuBois, Reynoldsville

North Central Industrial Education Center, Ridgway

Lock Haven University, Lock Haven

The Pennsylvania State University - DuBois

Clearfield County Career and Technology Center, Clearfield

Community Education Council of Elk and Cameron Counties, St. Marys

2006 College Fair



Senator Scarnati hosted his first annual College Fair on March 23, 2006 at Ridgway High School. Over 40 vendors were on hand to provide information to high school students, most in their junior or senior years. Vendors represented colleges, trade schools and the armed forces. The fair also provided two breakout sessions where representatives from the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency (PHEAA) spoke about financial aid.

Resolution Urges Congress to Revisit Flag Burning Issue

I intend to introduce a resolution urging Congress to revisit the issue of a constitutional amendment prohibiting the burning of the American flag.

Recently, the United States Senate voted on a constitutional amendment intended to make it illegal to burn the American flag. The amendment failed by one vote, which allows this heinous act to remain legal.

The flag is not only a symbol of this country and the freedoms we

possess, but it is also a symbol of the men and women - both past and present - who fight tyranny and oppression to secure the freedoms we value.

It is my hope that my colleagues in the State Senate and House will stand behind this resolution, urging the federal government to reconsider its position on this issue.

I recognize the belief of some liberals who feel flag burning is their constitutional right. However, I firmly believe they are misguided.

Burning a flag is committing a serious offense against our country, our veterans and military, our law enforcement officials, and all citizens who make up this great nation.

State Budget

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I could not support a 7-plus percent increase in spending. The taxpayers have told us again and again that they expect government to be prudent in spending.

This budget simply funded everything, while deferring other costs. This is not good public policy and even worse economics. I strongly support the spending limitations that were the key to the Taxpayer's Bill of Rights legislation that we approved earlier this year. This budget blows through those limitations and sets the Commonwealth up for a financial disaster in coming years.

I voted against this year's budget because I believe the state legislature can do a better job of putting money back in the pockets of taxpayers to help working families and homeowners with their property taxes, rising heating costs and rising gasoline prices.

Marriage Amendment Protects Sanctity of Marriage

The Senate approved a measure intended to protect the sanctity of marriage and the interests of children by amending the State's Constitution regarding marriage law.

House Bill 2381 - referred to as the marriage amendment - further defines the State Constitution's definition of marriage to read, "Only a marriage between one man and one woman shall be valid or recognized as a marriage in this Commonwealth."

Without this revision, the distinctive category in which marriage has been placed in for decades could be legally challenged, altered and forced upon the citizens of this Commonwealth.

Ultimately, this legislation works to protect children. The sanctity of marriage is the cornerstone to building strong families and even stronger communities.

If House Bill 2381 is signed into law, Pennsylvania would join the majority of states across the nation which believe that same-sex marriages should not be recognized, and the definition of marriage should not be altered in any way.

Minimum Wage Increase Supports Families, Protects Small Businesses

Pennsylvania is home to more than 420,000 minimum wage workers who will be receiving a wage increase on January 1, 2007.

Act 112 of 2006 raises the state's minimum wage from \$5.15 to \$6.25 beginning January 1, 2007. A second increase will occur on July 1, 2007, raising the minimum wage to \$7.15 an hour.

I supported this increase because the general public continues to be squeezed with rising heating costs, medical insurance and gasoline prices. The minimum wage increase is just one step in a continuing goal to advance the lives of working families.

As the Chairman of the Senate Labor and Industry Committee, I worked hard with my colleagues in a bipartisan fashion to support legislation that would provide a more substantial income for minimum wage earning individuals and families while protecting the needs and concerns of small business owners.

I offered a key amendment to this piece of legislation that protects small businesses operating

with 10 or fewer full-time employees. The amendment provides a delayed implementation schedule, allowing an expanded time frame to comply with the new minimum wage law. For these small companies, the minimum wage will increase to \$5.65 on January 1, 2007; \$6.65 on July 1, 2007; and \$7.15 on July 1, 2008.

The new law also provides for a 60-day training wage - based on the current federally mandated \$5.15 an hour minimum wage - for employees under 20 years of age. The law makes it clear that other workers may not be displaced to allow the hiring of training-wage workers.

Since the federal government last raised the minimum wage in 1997, the District of Columbia and 20 other states - including neighboring states New York, New Jersey, Delaware and Maryland - have raised the minimum wage above the federally mandated \$5.15 per hour.

The last time Pennsylvania's General Assembly increased the minimum wage over a federally mandated wage was 1988.

Law Limits Protests at Military Funerals

Responding to protests and harassment at military funerals in Pennsylvania, the Legislature recently approved legislation to limit the scope of such activity and protect the rights of grieving military families.

Act 63 of 2006 will require protesters to remain 500 feet from any funeral, memorial service or memorial procession beginning one hour before and ending one hour after the event. Violators would be charged with a third-degree misdemeanor.

The pickets, which have turned up across Pennsylvania and the nation, target grieving family members with vulgar language and other harassment to protest social and political issues.

There are a few ceremonies we hold in our society as sacred and as consecrated as that of a funeral service. Unfortunately, a few zealots have intruded into those services as publicity stunts to promote their own agendas. That is outrageous and inappropriate in every way imaginable.

The families of fallen service members suffer enough pain and anguish without having to endure the antics of those unscrupulous individuals who would tarnish a solemn occasion to promote themselves and their agenda.

Pennsylvania is not alone in taking steps to protect the sanctity of memorial services. Currently, legislation has been introduced in 27 states to ban or restrict protests at funerals or commemorative services and five states (Indiana, Missouri, Oklahoma, South Dakota and Wisconsin) have already enacted laws.

We cannot ever repay those who die in defense of our country. But we can honor their memory and pay tribute to their unflinching courage by ensuring that their final services are not sullied by the antics of a few insensitive publicity seekers.

Upcoming Kid Fest 2006

Senator Joe Scarnati's

Kid Fest

Saturday, November 4, 2006

10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

University of Pittsburgh – Bradford Campus
Sport & Fitness Center

Exhibitors from federal, state, and local government programs will be on-hand to share their information and expertise with both parents and children. Many of the services and programs provided are in affect in constituents' individual communities. In addition, snacks and games make it a fun-filled day of activities for children of all ages to enjoy.

