

State Senator MARY JO WHITE



Reports to You

21ST DISTRICT • WINTER 2009

A MESSAGE FROM SENATOR MARY JO WHITE

There is an old Chinese curse: "May you live in interesting times." 2009 certainly qualifies as one of the more interesting times in my political life. In a global economic downturn, Pennsylvania was faced with a \$3 billion shortfall for 2009 and little relief in sight for the coming fiscal year. Fortunately for taxpayers, states can't print money or borrow to cover a deficit (unlike the federal government). Essentially, we were left with two options: cut spending or raise taxes.

The debate was long and rancorous and lasted into the fall, creating hardship for many entities faced with uncertain funding or no funding at all. While I am not proud of the process, the final result is one we can live with and Pennsylvania is not on the watch list of potential state meltdowns.

We avoided a personal income tax increase and shelved an ill-advised proposal that would have taxed tickets to cultural events and museums. If we want to promote these activities it seems strange to give them money with one hand and tax it away with the other. I visited the beautifully restored Warner Theater in Erie with Senator Jane Earl for an arts fundraiser. We are blessed with many such theaters in the 21st District and now, more than ever, these nonprofits and others need our individual help.

This year marked the 150th anniversary of the drilling of the first commercial oil well in the world by Colonel Edwin Drake near Titusville, PA. The event was a year-long celebration, largely centered on Drake Well Museum, with re-enactments, lectures, entertainment, and of course, food. It is difficult to believe that the petroleum industry is only 150 years old when we see the changes it brought to the world. I recently toured a Marcellus gas well site in Lycoming County with Senator Gene Yaw. In the development stage the project is huge. Once it is completed, however, because of new horizontal drilling technology, the actual surface footprint is quite small with hundreds of acres of production from a single pad.

Economic development from the Marcellus Shale natural gas region is a bright spot in Pennsylvania's future, providing revenue for landowners and the state as well as clean burning fuel for America. At a recent Oil and Gas forum at the beautiful Erie Bayfront Convention Center I saw hundreds of visitors and exhibitors from around the country.

I recently joined the Board of Visitors for the Graduate School of Public Health at the University of Pittsburgh as well as Pitt's Health Sciences Committee. H1N1 influenza has focused attention on public health and prevention and presents real challenges to policy makers. Vaccine shortages should cause a thorough review of our preparedness plans. The best advice for staying healthy this winter? Wash your hands, cough into your sleeve, and get vaccinated if you are in the high risk categories.

We are involved in discussions with DEP to attempt to identify funding options to continue the very important black fly and West Nile virus spraying programs throughout the district.

It seemed to me that the veterans observances this year were better attended and more heartfelt. I was particularly moved by the dedication of the granite marker in Soldier's Grove behind the Capitol building honoring Specialist Ross McGinnis. This young man from Knox in Clarion County lost his life in Iraq and received the nation's highest tribute, the Medal of Honor, for saving the lives of his fellow soldiers.

As we approach the holiday season, many anticipate a scaled-down celebration this year. As a community we should help the less fortunate and count our blessings. Best wishes for health and happiness in 2010.

Mary Jo
Senator Mary Jo White

PENNSYLVANIA PROUD – *The 2008 professional sports season culminated in a trio of titles and an impressive collection of trophies for Pennsylvania teams. The Pittsburgh Steelers and Pittsburgh Penguins won the Super Bowl and Stanley Cup, respectively, and the Philadelphia Phillies won the World Series. Sports fans were given a rare glimpse of all three trophies together at the same time when they went on display at the Capitol.*



State Budget Reduces Spending, Avoids Income Tax Hike

After prolonged debate, Pennsylvania enacted a 2009-2010 state budget package that reduces state spending and maintains state services and programs without a broad-based tax increase.

The budget sets General Fund spending at \$27.85 billion – **more than \$1 billion less than the Governor's initial budget request and \$432 million less** than the approved 2008-09 budget total of \$28.267 billion. It increases basic education funding by \$300 million and restores support for human services programs.

In addition to averting an increase in the personal income tax, the budget plan defers a proposed severance tax on the Marcellus shale gas. Once the pipeline infrastructure is in place and this industry is established, such a tax may be appropriate. For now, the Commonwealth will receive \$240 million in revenue over a two-year period for leasing restricted portions of state forest land (of which we have 2 million acres) for natural gas drilling. This does not include state parks. Recently, fees on producers were increased for the first time in 25 years – from \$100 to about \$2,600



to cover the costs of permitting and inspections to assure compliance with environmental regulations. Enactment of a state budget was long overdue, and this package meets the goals of getting funding to local community providers caught in the impasse, and shielding taxpayers from irresponsible spending and broad-based tax hikes.

Budget Reform: Getting the Numbers Right

Reasonable minds can differ as to the various spending proposals in a budget. It helps, however, if you are all singing from the same page when it comes to the amount of money available. To help the process along in the future, this budget package included the creation

of an **independent fiscal office**. This non-partisan agency would produce a binding revenue estimate by June 15 for the coming fiscal year. Currently, the Governor's Office alone certifies projected revenues.

The fiscal office would review all department and agency budget

requests, and develop performance measures for state programs and departments.

Health Insurance: New Laws Increase Availability

While the health care battles rage on in Washington, we have taken steps to help the uninsured in Pennsylvania.

The largest segment of uninsured in Pennsylvania (roughly half) consists of young adults age 18 to 34. With the tight job market it seems that more of our children are staying at home, postponing marriage, and enjoying mom's cooking and laundry services. **Act 4 of 2009** permits insured persons to extend their health insurance to dependents up to age 30 who are unmarried, have no dependents, reside in PA or are enrolled as a full-time student, and are not otherwise eligible for insurance or government benefits.

COBRA is not about snakes. It is a federal law whose formal name is the Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act. It currently provides that for employers with 20 or more employees, certain former employees, retirees and other beneficiaries can continue their health coverage at group rates for up to 18 months. Pennsylvania Act 2 of 2009 creates a "mini cobra" which would **extend this option to employees of businesses with 2 to 19 employees**. For more information visit www.ins.state.pa.us and in the Search Box type "Mini-Cobra."

Gaming Law Reform Bill Approved by Senate

I continue to believe that it is bad public policy to fund essential government services through gambling. Nevertheless, it is here and so it makes sense to keep it as corruption free as possible.

I co-sponsored **Senate Bill 711** which made numerous changes to the state's gambling law to re-establish the ban on political contributions, strengthen conflict of



interest and outside employment rules, and deny gaming licenses for persons with certain criminal records.

This budget gives the current slots venues the right to offer table games.

The Senate insisted that any expansion of gambling include the reforms of Senate Bill 711. I voted against the gambling expansion, but for the reforms.

Senate Approves Legislation to Make Do Not Call Registration Permanent

I was quick to sign up for the "Do Not Call" registry and I have certainly enjoyed the relative peace of less frequent telephone solicitations. By law we were unable to prohibit charitable and political calls, and certain firms with whom you have a business relationship can still call, but it is a great improvement.

The Senate has now passed **Senate Bill 304** which would **make it unnecessary for you to re-register every five years**. Instead, you would stay on the list until you ask to have your number removed. For now, if you registered in late 2004,

you will have to re-register one more time.

To register, you can call toll-free **1-888-777-3406**, or visit www.attorneygeneral.gov and click on "Consumers" and then "Do Not Call List." You can also mail your name, complete mailing address, telephone number and signature to:

Office of Attorney General
Bureau of Consumer Protection
Do Not Call List
Strawberry Square, 15th Floor
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Senate Approves White's Capital Punishment Bill

In 2002 the United States Supreme Court ruled that it was unconstitutional to apply the death penalty to a person who was mentally retarded. The Court left it up to the states to set the procedures for making the assessment.

The Senate passed **Senate Bill 628**, which I sponsored, that would establish a pre-trial hearing by a judge for making this determination. There is general agreement on the definition of mental retardation, but there has been disagreement about who should make the deci-

sion and when. Some in the law enforcement community think it should be decided by a jury after the trial.

This is the third time my bill has passed the Senate and I certainly hope that we can give our courts the guidance they need to implement the Supreme Court's directive. With the costs and lengthy delays involved in capital cases, a pre-trial determination is the logical way to proceed. I hope this time the House of Representatives will agree.

Additional Unemployment Compensation

As of November 22, Pennsylvanians who are out of work through no fault of their own may be eligible to receive up to 20 additional weeks of emergency unemployment compensation.

If you are receiving unemployment and have not been notified by

mail, and believe you are eligible, contact the Unemployment Compensation Service Center for assistance at **1-888-313-7284**.

For more information or to file a claim for unemployment benefits online, go to www.uc.pa.gov.



"The First Shot," a painting by Franklin artist Deac Mong produced at the request of retired Butler County Judge Martin M. O'Brien, left, is on display at the Heinz History Center. It depicts an attempted ambush of George Washington in 1753, considered "the first shot" in the French and Indian War.

We Need High-Speed Internet

Many of the calls, letters and emails I receive are complaints about the unavailability of broadband Internet service in our area. I have been concerned about this issue for many years and it is like pulling teeth to try and convince providers to offer more service in rural areas. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 included \$7.2 billion in stimulus money available

to states to **bring high-speed Internet service to unserved or underserved areas** across the country. Several proposals were submitted by groups in this area, including one by the Technology Council of Northwest Pennsylvania which was one of 13 proposals "highly recommended" by the Commonwealth after a review of 130 Pennsylvania applications.

The National Telecommunica-

Increasing Accountability in Environmental Spending

Chair the Senate Environmental Resources and Energy Committee. While this may appear to be "inside baseball," these bills, approved by the Senate, are designed to improve legislative oversight and increase transparency and accountability in spending on environmental initiatives:

Senate Bill 115 requires DEP to post all clean air State Implementation Plans for air quality on its website.

Senate Bill 116 requires DEP to compile an annual report of all special funds and restricted accounts that it administers.

Don't Toll I-80

The Rendell Administration's request to turn Interstate 80 into a toll road was rejected by the federal government last year, but was recently resubmitted. I've joined several Senate colleagues in writing the U.S. Secretary of Transportation to reject this bad idea once again.

Turning I-80 into a toll road would have significant economic consequences for businesses and residents who use the roadway, would pile debt on the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission, and is not necessary for the maintenance of the highway.

Economic development along I-80 has occurred under the assumption that it would remain a toll-free road. Along with the increased burden on citizens, we've heard from citizens, businesses, farmers, small power plants, and even hospitals who say the tolls will add millions to their operating costs – which will mean fewer jobs and increased consumer costs. Those are just a few of the reasons 63 percent of Pennsylvanians surveyed oppose the tolling plan.

A 2005 PennDOT study concluded that tolling I-80 should not be pursued, and a major reason was because the entire 311 miles of I-80 has already been reconstructed since the 1980s. Nothing has changed since 2005 to require a 300 percent increase in reconstruction funding.

tions and Information Administration and the Rural Utilities Service will distribute \$4 billion in the first round of awards in February 2010 and \$3.2 billion in the second round by the end of September. These grants are highly competitive; 2,200 applications have been received, requesting nearly \$28 billion in funding.

Senate Bill 117 requires online postings of project descriptions and dollars spent on Keystone Recreation Park and Conservation Fund Act (Key'93) projects.

Senate Bill 118 requires DEP to deposit hazardous waste fines and penalties into the state fund for cleaning up spills and releases.

Home Heating Assistance Program Open

Pennsylvania's Low-Income Home Energy Assistance (LIHEAP) cash grant program is accepting applications for the 2009-10 heating season.

The income limits have been decreased and the competition for funds may be stiff. Apply as soon as possible. Cash grants are based on income, family size, type of heating fuel and region.

Household sizes and income limits for LIHEAP's 2009-10 season are:

- Individual – \$16,245
- Family of two – \$21,855
- Family of three – \$27,465
- Family of four – \$33,075
- Family of five – \$38,685
- Family of six – \$44,295
- Family of seven – \$49,905
- Family of eight – \$55,515

(For each additional person add \$5,610).

2010 Census

Required by the U.S. Constitution every 10 years, the census determines the number of Pennsylvania representatives in Congress, as well as the distribution of more than \$300 billion in government funding.

Census questionnaires will be delivered or **mailed to U.S. households in March 2010**. Many households will receive a replace-

ment questionnaire in April, with census workers visiting homes that do not return the surveys.

With only 10 questions, the 2010 Census questionnaire is one of the shortest in history and takes about 10 minutes to complete. By law, the U.S. Census Bureau cannot share the responses with anyone, including other federal agencies and law enforcement entities.

- To apply for LIHEAP, call your local County Assistance Office:
- Butler County: 724-284-8844
 - Clarion County: 814-226-1780
 - Erie County: 814-461-2002
 - Forest County: 814-755-3552
 - Venango County: 814-437-4354
 - Warren County: 814-726-2540

Individuals with Internet access may also apply electronically via the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Access to Social Services (COMPASS) Website at www.compass.state.pa.us.



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ENERGY – *Pennsylvania is poised to become a national leader in natural gas production, as extraction begins in the reserves known as “Marcellus Shale.” As Chair of the Senate Environmental Resources and Energy Committee, Senator White toured a working Marcellus Shale drilling facility in Lycoming County.*