

STATE SENATOR ROB WONDERLING

Reports



TO THE 24TH SENATORIAL DISTRICT

JANUARY 2006

A MESSAGE FROM SENATOR WONDERLING

Over the last three years, my office has had the privilege of assisting over 10,000 constituents with state government issues. I truly enjoy serving as your State Senator and we will continue working to make sure your voices are heard. However, earlier this year I was discouraged with the unseemly and unwarranted time spent on legislative pay raises. I never had any intention of supporting an increase in my salary; therefore, I voted against it and strongly supported the recent repeal. I am encouraged that the hue and cry over the pay raise issue has instilled in citizens a greater awareness of the actions of their legislators and state government. I hope that the bright light of public scrutiny will continue to shine on state government and that an increase in citizen involvement will motivate the General Assembly to make even bolder reforms to control health insurance costs, reduce property taxes and improve the economy.

Committee Works to Protect Consumers

During my first year as Chairman of the Senate Communications and Technology Committee, we initiated action on legislation to protect the identity and safety of our citizens. To combat the growing problem of identity theft, I was joined by several of my colleagues in the Senate and House to roll out a series of bills that will prevent personal information from getting into the hands of criminals.

Spyware is a major tool that identity thieves use to steal personal information. I co-sponsored Senate Bill 711 to make it a crime to distribute spyware to a computer without the user's consent or knowledge. The bill passed the Senate and is now before the House.

The General Assembly recently approved legislation that I introduced to deal with another threat to Pennsylvania consumers – the loss of personal information through computer breaches. This year com-

puter breach incidents across the nation have put the personal information of more than 50 million people at risk. The new law (Act 94) requires any entity that collects and stores computerized data which includes personal information to notify affected customers of any breach of its security systems.

I also introduced Senate Bill 713 to require any cell phone company operating in the state to obtain permission from its customers before including them in the subscriber directory, and Senate Bill 601 to prohibit the transmission or disclosure of a person's social security number on printed documents or on the internet. Both of these bills were passed by the Senate this past fall.

In addition to these bills, Senate Bill 180 allows consumers to place a security alert or a security freeze on their credit reports. A security alert warns requestors of the credit report that the consumer's identity may have been compromised, while a security freeze would prohibit credit agencies from disclosing that person's credit report without specific pre-authorization. I also sponsored Senate Bill 714 to enable victims of identity theft to restart their lives more quickly by requiring PENNDOT to issue them new drivers license numbers.

If you think you may be the victim of identity theft, you should report the circumstances to the Federal Trade Commission by calling toll-free 1-877-ID THEFT.

Sen. Wonderling joins several of his colleagues to unveil a package of legislation to protect the personal information of Pennsylvania consumers. The legislative package will help ensure that important information such as account passwords, Social Security numbers and credit card numbers do not fall into the wrong hands.



Legislative Package Benefits National Guard Members

The Pennsylvania National Guard has nearly 3,500 troops deployed overseas—the largest combat deployment of state Guard troops since World War II. We were proud to support a package of legislation in the General Assembly that will provide added benefits for our Guard members to acknowledge the great value of their service.

Many important pieces of this legislative package have already been signed into law. One measure we passed adds an additional 15 days of annual paid leave for PA National Guard members who are employed by the Commonwealth. We also supported passage of a measure which mandates that PA National Guard members who are returning from active duty may not be penalized for renewing or reinstating vehicle insurance coverage.

Two other bills were recently signed into law to help our men and women in uniform. Senate Bill 869 would extend eligibility for health coverage of deployed soldiers who are full-time students for the period of their active duty.

Senate Bill 358 would give National Guard members who have

been called away for active military service additional time to complete their education using Educational Assistance Program grants.

The National Guard package also includes legislation that would provide an employer tax credit for Guard members, extend subsidized child care benefits, and exempt military personnel on duty outside the Commonwealth from occupational assessment, per capita and similar taxes.

Our Guard members deserve our deepest thanks for their service. We

are very pleased to be providing help for our troops on the home front, while they risk their lives thousands of miles away. When filing state tax returns for 2005, residents can check-off a box to give some of their income tax refund to the Military Family Relief Fund which helps support our servicemen and women who are in financial need with basic necessities. Veterans should call their county Veterans Affairs office to discuss benefits, such as healthcare, education and pensions.

While interviewing Bucks County Habitat for Humanity staff and volunteers for his monthly video show, Senator Wonderling met Cheryl and her daughter Hannah, future owners of one of the new townhouses being constructed in Trumbauersville.



Growing Greener Update

Growing Greener II will provide \$625 million over 6 years for a variety of environmental and conservation projects. The DEP will receive \$230 million for watershed protection, mine reclamation and to clean up brownfields. It also includes \$10 million annually for advanced energy

projects and up to \$2.5 million annually for a future sales tax holiday for energy efficient appliances. Conservation and Natural Resources will receive \$217 million for state parks and forests and open space conservation. Grants will also be available for community park and recreation programs. Another \$80

million is allotted to the Department of Agriculture to supplement farmland preservation and reduce the backlog by 300 farms that need to be saved. A key provision of the program that we were insistent on including is the \$90 million County Environmental Initiative Program.

The first round of grants was recently awarded and we are pleased that several important projects in my district will receive funding, including \$100,000 for Milford Township to preserve open space and protect wildlife habitats in Unami Forest. The Lehigh County Conservation District received \$37,000 to improve fish habitat and reduce siltation pollution along Saucon Creek.

We must do our best to protect the environment and ensure that we pass on a clean Earth to the next generation. We look forward to seeing the positive effects that Growing Greener will bring to our area, and I am very pleased that funding for all of these improvements will come without any new taxes.

Lauren Phelps, a student at Lafayette College, has been participating in the Wondership Intern Program this semester. The program gives students the opportunity to acquire valuable public service experience by performing research projects, helping constituents, compiling data and assisting with special events. Interns also spend a day at the state capitol building shadowing the senator during his legislative duties. Call Juan at 610-250-5624 to join our team.



Wonderling Supports Legislation Protecting Property Rights

In June, the U.S. Supreme Court made a controversial ruling that allows governments to seize personal property to make room for private development projects. While this ruling severely limits the property rights of private citizens, the Supreme Court gave states the authority to pass laws providing greater protection in eminent domain disputes.

In light of this ruling, the General

Assembly is taking steps to protect Pennsylvania property owners from having their property taken from them. Legislation was recently passed by the Senate to prohibit the use of eminent domain solely for private development. This legislation strikes the right balance between the property rights of citizens and allowing local government to revitalize blighted neighborhoods.

and immediately after a state of disaster emergency. The bill would prohibit unconscionably excessive pricing during a declared state of disaster emergency and 30 days after.

Complaints could be made to the Attorney General, who would have the authority to investigate possible price gouging incidents. If an investigation verifies price gouging, the business would face civil penalties of up to \$10,000.

This legislation would give the Attorney General's Office the tools they need to prevent price gouging if our Commonwealth is faced with a natural disaster, terrorist attack or other catastrophic event. We hope this legislation will be signed into law in the near future to extend this important protection to Pennsylvania consumers.

Senate Acts to Prevent Price Gouging

With a number of brutal hurricanes battering the U.S. this year, we've seen that natural disasters can bring out the best and worst in people. While there are a great number of inspiring stories that demonstrate the strength of the

human spirit in the aftermath of these catastrophes, there are also a number of stories of price gouging and unethical business practices that are a major cause for concern.

The Senate unanimously passed Senate Bill 450, legislation that would prevent price gouging during

Senate Passes Legislation to Strengthen Gaming Law

In 2004 I voted against legislation to allow slot machine gambling in Pennsylvania because of widespread concerns about the harm that expanded gaming could cause in our communities. I was proud to support legislation that was recently passed by the Senate that would strengthen the ethics of Pennsylvania's gaming law and ensure that no public official will profit from our state's gaming venues or suppliers.

Senate Bill 862 would prohibit any public official, executive-level public employee or party official, or the spouse or minor child of the official, from holding a financial interest

in a licensed gaming entity during their tenure in office and for one year thereafter. Current law allows public officials to hold up to one-percent ownership in gaming-related companies.

The bill also sets new ethical standards for the panel established to regulate slot machine gaming in the Commonwealth, the Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board.

If we must allow expanded gaming in the state, Pennsylvanians deserve a gaming industry that is free of the specter of corruption. We hope that we can accomplish this by seeing Senate Bill 862 signed into law in the near future.

WONDERLING SUPPORTS HEATING ASSISTANCE

With the drastic increases in energy and home fuel costs this winter, we were concerned that many low-income and elderly citizens may be left out in the cold. Fortunately, the Senate acted quickly by amending legislation to dedicate nearly \$25 million more in state funding to the federally funded Low-Income Heating and Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP). The bill, recently signed into law, redirects a portion of the state's Gross Receipts Tax to LIHEAP, which will help thousands more eligible homeowners and renters pay their heating bills. Crisis grants are also available for emergency situations, such as broken heating equipment or leaking lines, or if a person is at risk of having their utility service terminated. Households with incomes up to 135% of the federal poverty level can apply on-line or at their county assistance office. For a family of four, the income limit is \$26,123.



Senator Wonderling congratulated coaches and athletes from the Emmaus High School Girls' Swimming and Diving Team for winning the 2005 PIAA State Championship and Bryan Reiss for capturing the 2005 PIAA State Wrestling Championship, Class AAA.

M-SAF Initiative Would Promote Medical Information Technology

Many of the Commonwealth's large health care providers keep patient medical records organized by using electronic health information systems. These systems improve the delivery of information so doctors can provide more accu-

rate care, as well as improving public health reporting and coordination of care among health care providers.

However, while some of our state's larger providers already use this technology, the costs of introducing this system is too high for many other health care providers. I have introduced legislation that would make this technology more widely available.

Senate Bill 934 would create the Medical Safety Automation Fund (M-SAF), which would provide matching grants up to \$1 million for health care providers to implement a medical safety information system for patient health records. This legislation would allow our health care providers to use the latest information technology to provide the best and most accurate care possible.

My legislation would ensure that the privacy and security of patients' medical records is a top priority. Patients would have the opportunity to review their own medical records to make sure the information is correct and complete, and they would also have the final say on who has access to their records.

Recent news stories warning of a possible avian flu pandemic underscore the need for this type of legislation. Improved public health reporting and coordination of care would be crucial in dealing with an infectious disease outbreak or a bioterror attack. Greater access to information would allow the health care community to determine the location and extent of an outbreak so they could take the necessary steps to save lives.

State Senator Rob Wonderling

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Tom Panzarella, President/CEO of Cook Technologies in Green Lane Borough, demonstrated the Freedom Lift to Senator Wonderling during a tour. The innovative company partnered with John Spletzer (I) and Dr. Emory Zimmers, Jr.(r) of the Lehigh University to develop the automated transport and retrieval system.

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