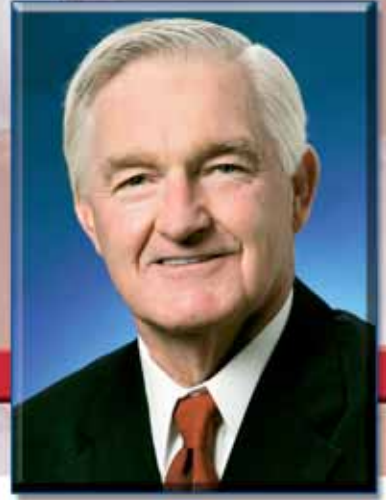


State Senator Bob Robbins

REPORTS TO THE 50TH DISTRICT

SUMMER 2006



Robbins Bill Would Maximize Home Heating Assistance

Last year, for the first time, Pennsylvania began using state dollars – approximately \$19 million – to supplement federal home heating funding of \$189 million.

With the Commonwealth playing a more active role, it is important that the General Assembly has greater oversight in this area. I've introduced legislation to not only maximize federal LIHEAP (Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program) dollars, but also expand eligibility for the program and ensure greater accountability.

Among other provisions, Senate Bill 1270, the Home Energy Assistance in Time of Need, or the **HEAT ON Act**, would set into law that those making 150 percent of the poverty level (\$29,025 for a family of four) or less are

eligible for LIHEAP grants. This past year, approximately **70,000 additional households** were made eligible for grants when income guidelines were temporarily increased to 150 percent.

It would also require the state to **verify the income of all applicants and provide thorough audits** of funds. These accountability practices are currently not being utilized and

would help curb possible abuse. **HEAT ON** would also require energy vendors that participate in LIHEAP to offer customers budget billing (even payments over 12 months).

Although it is warm right now, home heating costs will soon be of concern to low-income families. As such, it is important that we address this issue as quickly as possible.

Senate Votes, Lobbyist Reports Available for Online Viewing

Citizens who want to view Senate votes on legislation, read debate transcripts or see who is lobbying the Senate for what bills, can now do so via the Internet.

The Senate posts *Senate Journals* online, making all Senate debates and roll call votes widely accessible. The *Senate Journals* for the current legislative session are posted to the Senate's web site, www.pasen.gov, as soon as possible after floor action. (It typically takes about a month to compile, publish and post a *Senate Journal* online.) *Senate Journals* from past legislative sessions will also be posted to the Internet in the near future.

Additionally, I have introduced legislation to post votes – Senate and House of Representatives – online immediately after they are recorded. Senate Bill 1099 would make the information we now provide online avail-

able in a more timely manner. Not only that, it would **allow citizens to search for votes taken by a member of the Senate or House of Representatives**.

Lobbyist expense reports collected by the Senate since the start of 2003 are also available for viewing online. Citizens can see who is lobbying, who individuals are representing, and how they are spending their money. The lobbyist disclosure reports can be found under "Topics of Special Interest" at www.pasen.gov.

Technology has reached the point where we can open up the legislative process like never before. I urge citizens to take advantage of these new opportunities to track votes, debates and lobbyist activities. I will continue to push to make state government more open and more accessible.

Minimum Wage Increase

The Senate recently passed legislation to increase the state's minimum wage while protecting small businesses.

The minimum wage will increase from \$5.15 to **\$6.25 on January 1, 2007**, followed by another increase to **\$7.15 on July 1, 2007**. To ease the burden on small businesses, the bill also includes a lower minimum wage for businesses with the equivalent of 10 full-time employees or less, as well as a training wage for workers age 17 and younger.

New Law Limits Harassment at Military Funerals

In the ultimate display of disrespect, a Kansas-based organization has been traveling the country picketing military funerals. The pickets target grieving family members with vulgar language to protest political and social issues.

Fortunately, Pennsylvania has joined other states enacting a law to **protect the right of families to mourn in peace**. The General Assembly passed Act 63 of 2006, which I co-sponsored, to require demonstrators 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. On Memorial Day, President Bush signed federal legislation that would limit protests at memorial services in national cemeteries.

As a Vietnam veteran, I am appalled at the thought of grieving families having to listen to vulgar, political diatribes while trying to lay a loved one to rest. This law protects the free speech rights of the demonstrators, no matter how detestable they are.

But, it also provides a short period of peace for the families of fallen heroes.



Property Tax Reduction Approved

Rising property taxes are a concern for all homeowners, but are an extraordinary burden for seniors on a low or fixed income.

While it is extremely difficult to enact legislation completely eliminating property taxes, the General Assembly has passed the **Pennsylvania Taxpayer Relief Act** – a law that will provide for substantial reductions in property taxes for all homeowners while expanding the popular Property Tax and Rent

Rebate Program for senior citizens.

The expansion of the Property Tax and Rent Rebate Program will increase rebate payments for seniors by \$200 million and add over 400,000 new claimants.

The new law gives taxpayers in each school district the option to increase the local 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.

In Butler, Crawford, Lawrence and Mercer Counties, the average property taxpayer will see a 28% reduction in property taxes if the local referenda are approved.

Just as important, voters in each school district will have the authority to vote “yes” or “no” on future school property tax increases that exceed 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.

I believe that this new law is a solid step in providing tangible property tax relief – with a focus on assisting seniors on low or fixed incomes.

Robbins' Bill Protecting Guard Benefits Signed into Law

Legislation has been signed into law that will ensure that members of the National Guard who are disabled in the line of duty remain eligible for an important educational benefit.

The Pennsylvania **National Guard Educational Assistance Program** provides individuals who enlist in the Guard up to five years of free college education, based on the rate of tuition

at the State System of Higher Education. In return, they agree to serve in the Guard for six years.

I learned that if a Guard member on active duty becomes disabled and can no longer serve in the Guard, they are disqualified from the Educational Assistance Program. The new law reverses this policy, preserving this assistance for these men and women during a time when they need it most.

New Law Coordinates State, Federal Prescription Programs

The Senate unanimously passed a new law that I co-sponsored that updates Pennsylvania's prescription drug assistance programs to work with the federal Medicare prescription drug program.

Under Senate Bill 1188, the state PACE and PACENET programs will supplement the benefits available under the new federal Medicare Part D program. In addition, the law authorizes the state to assist recipients in signing up for the most appropriate Medicare plan and coordinate benefits so enrollees in PACE/PACENET and Medicare continue to fill their prescriptions at pharmacies without additional cost, delay or paperwork.

It will also pay **Medicare Part D premiums for PACE enrollees and eliminate the PACENET deductible**. The new law ensures that seniors do not lose out on any of the benefits available through PACE and PACENET if they sign up for the federal program. In addition, the state will save approximately \$140 million in the coming year by integrating these programs.



Senator Robbins spoke with the leadership of the Pennsylvania Disabled American Veterans (DAV) at the Capitol in June after the dedication of the new vans that will be used by the DAV to transport Pennsylvania veterans with VA healthcare needs.

Tuition Aid to Families of Fallen Soldiers

The Senate approved a new law I co-sponsored to provide **tuition credits** to spouses and children of Pennsylvania National Guard members who die while on active military duty.

The measure would also cover all or a portion of the **life insurance premiums** for Pennsylvania National Guard members called to active duty

to serve in a combat zone as well as those killed in the line of duty on or after September 11, 2001.

No amount of financial assistance can make up for the loss of a spouse, father or mother killed while serving their country. But we can and should step in and help the families of fallen soldiers in any way possible.

Robbins Votes “NO” on 2006-07 State Budget

Last year, I signed onto the Taxpayer Fairness Act, legislation that would limit state budget increases to the rate of inflation. If this were enacted into law, state spending this year could increase by approximately 3.47 percent. The 2006-07 budget that was voted on in July increases spending by at least 5.79 percent.

I voted against the budget because it fails to limit spending, and sets Pennsylvania up for some potential trouble down the road. It's not that there aren't things to like. There are many worthy initiatives I support – several that I fought for that would benefit the 50th Senatorial District. But I feel strongly that we have to enact meaningful legislation limiting spending.

The spending increase of 5.79 percent is much more than the inflation rate, so the Governor cannot blame increased costs. Worse, the increase is actually closer to eight percent when Medicaid costs are included. The administration is deferring approximately \$300 million in Medicaid payments until 2007. It's an accounting maneuver that hides the true cost. My fear is that the administration is setting

taxpayers up for a huge bill down the road – a bill that will require tax increases to cover the cost.

Taxpayers have seen this before. In 1990, when Governor Casey was running for re-election, that administration spent money freely. In 1991, taxpayers were hit with billions of dollars in new taxes. I don't want to see that happen again. Some will say, “But, we have a surplus.” Well, the Ridge

administration also ran a surplus. Back then, we used it to cut taxes and put money away in the Rainy Day Fund to protect taxpayers from tax hikes when the economy slowed.

That is what we should do now: **Return this surplus to taxpayers, or increase payments to the Rainy Day Fund.** Instead, Governor Rendell wants to spend it. That's why I voted “no.”

Senate Passes Robbins' “Science in Motion” Bill

Legislation that would place into law a nationally-acclaimed science education program was unanimously passed by the Senate and sent to the House of Representatives for consideration.

Senate Bill 414 would enact into law the **Science Technology Partnerships Program**. Better known as “Science in Motion,” the program makes state funding available to higher education institutions to purchase high-tech science equipment, such as atomic force microscopes and spectrophotometers. This equipment is then transported to and **shared with surrounding schools**.

This past year, 280 public, private, and parochial schools were served throughout the state by 11 higher education institutions, including Westminster College. Westminster College serves the Farrell, Grove City, Hermitage, Highlands, Jamestown, Lakeview, Laurel, Mercer, Mohawk, Neshannock, New Castle, Penn Crest, Seneca Valley, Sharon, Sharpsville, Slippery Rock, and Wilmington school districts.

Robbins' Anti-Methamphetamine Measures Pass Senate

Two bills I authored to combat the production of methamphetamine, or meth, were unanimously passed by the Senate recently.

- **Senate Bill 1120** would make it a felony of the third degree – punishable by up to seven years imprisonment – for operating a meth lab in the presence of a child.
- **Senate Bill 1121** would create “Meth Watch,” a joint program between law enforcement and retailers, training clerks to be aware of individuals purchasing meth ingredients in large amounts. It also educates and warns consumers of meth and the illegal purchase of meth ingredients.

Methamphetamine, a derivative of amphetamine, is a powerful stimulant that affects the central nervous system. Amphetamines were originally intended for use in nasal decongestants and bronchial inhalers and have limited medical applications. Methamphetamine production is a problem whose popularity is spreading because most of the ingredients used to make it can be purchased in local stores. The drug is “cooked” in home-made labs and is highly addictive and deadly.

The epidemic of methamphetamine is spreading locally and throughout the nation. I am pleased that the Senate

passed this legislation to provide law enforcement and retailers additional tools to combat this deadly drug. The threat goes beyond the actual user – **kids are neglected, or worse, exposed to the harmful effects of meth labs**. Senate Bill 1120 provides a deterrent, or punishment, for putting children in harms way.

Through the Meth Watch program, law enforcement and retailers work

together to increase awareness about the diversion of legal products – ingredients to make meth – and assist local communities in addressing the meth problem. These bills are a part of the “Pennsylvania Combat Meth Initiative,” a broader, seven-bill package unanimously passed by the Senate to make it more difficult for meth manufacturers to obtain the ingredients to make their deadly drug.



Senator Robbins joined Attorney General Tom Corbett and lawmakers to announce legislation aimed at combating the production of methamphetamine, an increasingly serious problem in rural areas and small cities.

Robbins Helps Unveil Mentored Youth Hunting Program

I was honored to join the Pennsylvania Game Commission and a coalition of sportsmen's groups recently to launch the Mentored Youth Hunting Program.

Last year, Pennsylvania became the first state in the nation to enact a Mentored Youth Hunting law. I was pleased to play a role in passing the legislation that provided the Game Commission with the authority to establish the Mentored Youth Hunting Program.

Pennsylvania is having a difficult time attracting new hunters. In response, a coalition of sportsmen's groups came up with the idea to *provide youth with a hands-on opportunity to be a part of a true hunt in a responsible way* – under the supervision of an experienced hunter.

The coalition includes the Big Brothers/Big Sisters "Pass It On" Program, the Central Counties Concerned Sportsmen, the National Rifle Association, the National Wild

Turkey Federation, and the U.S. Sportsmen's Alliance. For more information on the program, please go to the Pennsylvania Game Commission home page at: www.pgc.state.pa.us

Social Security Numbers Are Private

The Senate approved a new law intended to protect the privacy of social security numbers.

Act 60 of 2006 would prohibit any person or institution from making a Social Security number available to the public, and would forbid the use of Social Security numbers to access goods or services.

I co-sponsored this legislation because identity thieves seek Social Security numbers to carry out their illicit plans, and we have taken steps to keep them from getting their hands on that personal information.

Senate Approves Robbins' Route 6 Bill

The Senate approved my measure designating Linesville, Crawford County as the Route 6 "*Gateway to the West.*"

Historic U.S. Route 6 is the longest highway in the United States – 3,652 miles – stretching from Cape Cod in Massachusetts, through Pennsylvania, all the way to Long Beach Island in California. In Pennsylvania, it runs

400 miles through 11 northern counties from Pike County to Crawford County.

I am particularly pleased to promote Linesville as it will soon be the home of the National U.S. Route 6 Museum, which will highlight the impact and importance of U.S. Route 6 on the development of our country and will provide opportunities to educate the public on its historic significance.



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New Law Limits Eminent Domain

The General Assembly approved eminent domain reform legislation I co-sponsored that will protect the rights of Pennsylvania homeowners, small businesses, farms, and churches from condemnation for private development.

The Property Rights Protection Act prohibits the use of eminent domain for taking private property for commercial purposes without a finding of blight, as specifically defined by the bill. A related measure is designed to ensure fair compensation for property

taken through eminent domain.

The measure was introduced following a U.S. Supreme Court ruling that governments can seize property to make room for private development projects that promise to boost the local economy. The ruling prompted lawmakers to update Pennsylvania's laws and provide greater protection to owners of private property from governmental authorities who seek to abuse eminent domain powers.



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