

State Senator John Gordner

Reports



To the 27th Senatorial District

WINTER 2008

Gordner Continues to Fight Interstate 80 Tolling Plan

In July 2007, the General Assembly passed Act 44, which provides for the tolling of Interstate 80 to pay for Pennsylvania's increasing transportation infrastructure and mass transit needs. While no one disputes that additional funding is necessary for maintaining our bridges or for important road projects such as the proposed Central Susquehanna Valley Thruway, the proposed tolling of Interstate 80 is not the answer.

There are many reasons I voted against Act 44 and advocated against federal approval of the plan, including:

- The tolling proposal will have overwhelming negative impacts upon business and industry located along the I-80 corridor by greatly increasing transportation costs.
- The Turnpike Commission and the state Department of Transportation failed to sufficiently seek public input on the proposal prior to the passage of Act 44. Since the passage of Act 44, the Turnpike Commission has conducted a series of hearings and has received overwhelming negative public input.
- Act 44 received significant opposition in the General Assembly, passing by only an 11-vote margin in the Senate. The proposal has also generated significant opposition among the members of the state's Congressional delegation.
- A 2005 study by the state Department of Transportation concluded that tolling Interstate 80 was not a viable option to fund the state's transportation needs.
- The proposal to toll Interstate 80 fails to meet any of the three criteria required by the federal government to institute tolls on interstate highways. Those criteria include traffic congestion relief, reduction of vehicle emissions in non-attainment emission areas or the need to construct additional road infrastructure.

The tolling proposal required federal approval and the Federal Highway Administration has twice rejected the Turnpike Commission's application to institute tolls along Interstate 80, citing numerous deficiencies in the plan forwarded by the state. In the meantime, I and my fellow legislators along the I-80 corridor will be working in 2009 to forward alternative transportation funding initiatives.



Senator Gordner speaks at a Capitol rally in opposition to the proposal to institute tolls on Interstate 80. Among the attendees were Congressman John Peterson, State Representative Merle Phillips and State Representative Russ Fairchild.

Reforming State Government

The Senate of Pennsylvania continues to lead in efforts to make Pennsylvania government more open, accessible and accountable to the people.

On the first day of the 2007-2008 session, the Senate adopted a series of reforms making the Senate more accessible to the public. These rules included:

- Requiring roll call votes from the Senate floor and Senate committees to be posted on the Internet.
- Requiring the Senate's Legislative Journal – which includes the full text of floor debates – to be posted on the Internet.

- Requiring amendments to be posted on the Internet before they may be offered on the Senate floor.
 - Establishing a six-hour waiting period before the Senate votes on an amended bill or a conference committee report.
 - Requiring an updated fiscal note for a bill when an amendment to that bill has a fiscal impact.
 - Limiting session times to between 8 a.m. and 11 p.m.
 - Allowing Senate sessions to be viewed live at www.pasen.gov.
- The Senate also passed a number of important reform initiatives:

- SB 1 – overhauling and strengthening the Open Records Law.
- SB 467 – increasing penalties for violating the Sunshine Law.
- SB 468 – eliminating post-election sessions held between Election Day and November 30 in even-numbered years.
- SB 729 – posting government salary information online.
- SB 986 – prohibiting bonuses for Commonwealth employees.

I have also made the above information available through my website at senatorgordner.com for easy citizen access.

Labor and Industry Committee Active in Legislative Session

I am pleased to chair the Senate Labor and Industry Committee because it deals with important legislation in many areas that affect Pennsylvania citizens. The committee recently completed work on several important bills that Governor Ed Rendell has signed into law.

The highlight of the legislative session was passage of a bill that generally prohibits mandatory overtime for nurses and other direct care health professionals. This is an important patient safety issue, and the elimination of mandatory overtime in most instances should help reduce medical errors and help reduce the rising costs of providing health care. I was able to broker an agreement between health care facilities and representatives of the nursing industry that provides reasonable parameters for the facilities to provide medical care without requiring workers to cover double shifts.

Also signed into law was a bill I sponsored to increase monthly benefit payments to those who suffer from Black Lung and other occupational diseases. Under the Pennsylvania Occupational Disease Act, individuals who contract diseases peculiar to an

industry, such as coal miners who suffer from Black Lung, are entitled to monthly payments. Currently, those payments are \$125 per month and have been set at that level since 1979. My legislation increases the monthly payments to \$175, and because of the limited number of recipients – less than 500 – the proposal requires only a minimal amount of additional state spending. It is the least we can do to recognize the hard work of miners who built an industry that is so important to our area and our state.

The committee also continued its work on the state's Uniform Construction Code by successfully passing a bill which was signed into law that establishes a Code Advisory Committee which will work with the Department of Labor and Industry to implement commonsense requirements for compliance with the code for construction in Pennsylvania. The committee will consist of local government representatives, code officials and representatives of the building industry.



Senator Gordner questions a witness at a recent Capitol hearing. Also pictured is Senator Lisa Baker (R-Luzerne).

Senator Gordner Presents \$600,000 Grants to the Northern Dauphin and Berwick YMCAs for Expansion Projects

I was pleased to assist the Northern Dauphin County Branch YMCA to obtain a \$600,000 state grant for an expansion project at the Elizabethville facility.

According to Executive Director Susan Jacobs, the grant will be used for an expansion project that will include a senior wellness center at the YMCA. A large percentage of the branch's members are seniors and the wellness center will provide multiple services to improve their quality of life.

I was also pleased to assist the Berwick Area YMCA to obtain a \$600,000 state grant for an expansion project at the Berwick facility.

According to Chief Executive Officer Nick Pajovich, the grant will be used for a project to expand services to both teens and adults by increasing fitness space to include state-of-the-art fitness equipment where parents and kids can exercise together, 3-D climbing walls and high-tech fitness games. The expansion will allow the YMCA to offer more programs to combat obesity and related illnesses.

I included both projects as line items in the state's Capital Budget in 2006, allowing them to be eligible for state dollars. Both YMCAs met high standards to qualify for the grants by demonstrating regional needs and by gathering local support and funding commitments. The Upper Dauphin project totals over \$1 million, while the Berwick project is more than \$2 million.



Senator Gordner presents a grant check to Richard Curl, president of the Harrisburg Area YMCA and Susan Jacobs, executive director of the Northern Dauphin County YMCA.



Senator Gordner presents a grant check to Nick Pajovich, CEO of the Berwick Area YMCA.

More Families Eligible for Heating Assistance

The state's Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) offers cash grants to families that are struggling to meet rising fuel costs and families that experience a heating emergency, such as a broken furnace. The program was recently expanded to include families making up to 210 percent of federal poverty guidelines (about \$44,443 for a family of four), so many families who have not been

eligible for the program in the past may now be eligible.

The expansion of the program is expected to make an additional 80,000 Pennsylvanians eligible for LIHEAP statewide. To find out if you are eligible for LIHEAP, please contact your local county assistance office: 570-387-4232 (Columbia), 717-265-8919 (Dauphin), 570-826-2041 (Luzerne), 570-849-2001 (Montour), 570-988-5996

(Northumberland) or 570-621-3072 (Snyder).

Applicants will need to provide the names, Social Security numbers and proof of income for all household members, as well as a copy of a recent heating bill. Individuals with Internet access can also apply electronically at www.compass.state.pa.us, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Access to Social Services (COMPASS) website.

Gordner Urges Homeowners to Apply for Property Tax Cuts

Pennsylvania homeowners are eligible for property tax reductions by applying for a homestead exemption. The homestead exemption allows homeowners to reduce the assessed value of their home, which then reduces the homeowner's property tax burden. The homeowner's actual resale value remains unchanged.



Most homeowners have applied for and are receiving property tax relief through the homestead exemption. I would urge all recent homebuyers to take advantage of this valuable opportunity by contacting your county assessment office.

Additionally, Act 1 of 2006 permits county tax assessors to require re-application for the homestead

exemption once every three years. In the near future, homeowners in Dauphin County, Northumberland County and Snyder County will be notified and instructed on how to reapply for a homestead exemption.

According to county assessment officials, homeowners who previously applied and were granted an exemption in Columbia County, Luzerne County and Montour County will not have to reapply.

The deadline to apply for the homestead exemption is March 1st. I would encourage all recent homebuyers and homeowners in Dauphin County, Northumberland County and Snyder County to apply early to ensure their applications are processed and approved prior to the deadline.



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Property Tax/Rent Rebate Program Applications Available

The Property Tax/Rent Rebate program provides valuable assistance to low-income seniors who are struggling with rising property taxes. The program benefits eligible Pennsylvanians age 65 years or older, widows and widowers age 50 years or older and those with disabilities age 18 years or older. Participants can receive a rebate of up to \$650 based on their property taxes or rent paid during 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 contacting any of my district offices.

For updated information on these or any other state government programs, please visit my website at senatorgordner.com or email me at jgordner@pasen.gov.

