

State Senator John Gordner

Reports



To the 27th Senatorial District

WINTER 2007

Gordner Legislation Signed Into Law

During the recently completed 2005-2006 session of the General Assembly, I was able to have five of my prime sponsored bills signed into law. I am especially pleased that none of these measures require additional government spending, and that three of the laws will actually reduce government costs.

Act 29 of 2005 expanded the Technology Work Experience Internship Program, which I was originally able to pass into law in 2003. Under Act 29, graduate students will qualify for the technology internship program, which was previously only available to undergraduate students. This program has provided valuable work experi-

ence in technology related fields to students, preparing them for our new economy.

Act 27 of 2005 amended current law to allow for validation of property transfers and other conveyances that contain purely technical errors. When technical errors exist in such documents, it makes subsequent transfers of real estate difficult.

Act 91 of 2005 enacted anti-windfall provisions in the County Assessment Law to protect property tax payers. Under this law, when property is reassessed on a county-wide basis, school districts, municipalities and counties must adjust millage to a tax revenue neutral level. If the governing body then wishes to increase local real estate taxes, a

separate vote must be taken to do so, and the increases are capped.

Finally, Acts 166 and 167 of 2006 eliminated the obsolete and unnecessary functions of local property assessment by eliminating the elected position of assessor in townships. The law requires counties to perform such functions, so eliminating these locally elected positions saves valuable local tax dollars.

The legislation also clarified the law relating to assessment of wind generation equipment. While the law does not change any requirements for local permitting or zoning, it does address how to assess the equipment for tax purposes once the facility is approved by the local municipality.

Senator Gordner chairs a recent committee meeting in Harrisburg. In 2007, Senator Gordner will continue to Chair the Senate Labor and Industry Committee. He will also serve as Vice-Chairman of the Communications and Technology Committee and will serve on the Appropriations, Community and Economic Development, Consumer Protection and Professional Licensure and Judiciary Committees. Senator Gordner sought the committee assignments to continue his work on economic development and workforce development issues.



Senator Gordner Assumes Chairmanship Of Senate Committee

In July of 2006, I was named Chairman of the Senate Labor and Industry Committee. The Committee handles issues involving employer and employee relations, workforce development initiatives, and important economic matters. During the fall 2006 session, the Committee worked on two key pieces of legislation that were signed by the Governor: Workers' Compensation reform and changes to the Uniform Construction Code.

Act 147 (House Bill 2738) amends the Workers' Compensation Act to make numerous changes in litigation reform. One of the major costs associated with doing business in Pennsylvania is litigation expenses associated with workers' compensation claims.

In 2005, the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee issued a study of the Commonwealth's WC system that compared costs and procedures with workers' compensation in other states. Out of that report, bi-partisan legislation was introduced with the cooperation of the Pennsylvania Chamber of Business and Industry, the Pennsylvania Trial Lawyers Association, the Insurance Federation of Pennsylvania and organized labor.

Act 147 benefits both employers and claimants by reducing litigation costs, streamlining the appeal

process and improving the quality and timeliness of WC decisions.

Among the changes, the Act will: reduce the number of hearings by establishing strict case schedules, require mandatory mediation, establish resolution hearings to more quickly approve proposed settlements and place a cap on attorney fees.

The Act also increases the minimum weekly compensation for workers injured prior to 1993 and establishes an Uninsured Employers Guaranty Fund to provide benefits to injured workers whose employers did not carry required workers' compensation coverage.

It is estimated that employers in Pennsylvania could save more than \$100 million annually in litigation expenses and additional costs associated with the current system. Those are real dollars that businesses can use to expand and provide more employment opportunities for our workers.

Act 157 (House Bill 881) implements changes to the state's Uniform Construction Code, enacted in 1999. The concept behind the Uniform Construction Code is sound and ensures the safety of new construction projects. However, as time passed, we discovered problems with implementation of the Code.

There was confusion caused by

different local interpretations of the Code, a lengthy appeals process and differing schedules and rates for inspections of new construction. This often caused delays and extra expense in building projects.

Working with representatives of the building industry, code administrators and local governments, the committee moved another bi-partisan bill to address many of these issues.

Act 157 will require that plans for residential construction be approved within five business days; that appeals hearings be held within 30 days; and that decisions be made within five days when there is a dispute. The Act also limits filing fees for appeals and requires boards of appeals or courts to rely upon relevant interpretations of the Code in making decisions.

I will continue to chair the Labor and Industry Committee for the 2007 session of the General Assembly. I plan to address further reforms to the Uniform Construction Code, in addition to placing a major emphasis on workforce development issues so that we can continue to work with businesses and industries to create family-sustaining jobs.



Senator Gordner and Senator Joseph B. Scarnati of Jefferson County take testimony at a recent legislative hearing on workforce development issues. Senator Scarnati has been elected as the new President Pro Tempore of the Senate of Pennsylvania for the 2007 legislative session.



Children's Health Insurance Program Expands

The state's Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) provides health care coverage for more than 150,000 uninsured young people across the Commonwealth. I was pleased to support recent legislation to expand CHIP to enable more low-income children to receive health care services with little or no cost to parents.

Under the "Cover All Kids" initiative recently signed into law, families earning less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level will continue to get coverage for free. This means that a family of four could earn up to \$47,000 and still be eligible for CHIP coverage.

CHIP will also assist families earning up to 300 percent of the federal poverty guidelines – around \$60,000 for a family of four – by offering health care coverage for a low monthly premium. Premiums range from \$36 to \$57 per child, depending on the family's ability to pay.

Families with incomes greater than 300 percent of the federal poverty level may also purchase CHIP coverage, but without state financial assistance. Families would have to meet several financial and other hardship criteria before being eligible to purchase the coverage.

The legislation also creates a premium assistance program that allows the state to purchase health insurance coverage from a parent's employer-based program when it is more cost-effective, rather than enrolling the child in the state's subsidized insurance program.

The initiative strikes a balance between providing health insurance coverage for all children and preserving the private insurance market. More information on CHIP is available online at <http://chipcoverspakids.com> or by calling 1-800-986-KIDS.



Senator Gordner and Rep. Merle Phillips (R-108) present the Kelly Cup to Keystone State Senior Games participant Claus-Peter Folgner of Dornsife. The Kelly Cup is the highest award the Commonwealth presents to amateur athletes.

Property Tax And Rent Rebate Program Expanded

In the past, the state's Property Tax and Rent Rebate program has helped low-income senior citizens and disabled individuals by providing rebates of up to \$500 on their real estate taxes or rent. I was pleased to support legislation last June that will provide a historic expansion of this program beginning this year to help more homeowners in need.

The scope of the Property Tax and Rent Rebate program will more than double, providing tax relief to an additional 420,000 Pennsylvanians in 2007. The household income limits of the program have increased from \$15,000 a year to \$35,000, excluding half of all Social Security, Supplemental Security Income and Railroad Retirement Tier 1 benefits. The maximum rebate will also increase from \$500 to \$650 per household.

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. District residents can sign up by calling toll-free 1-888-222-9190 weekdays between 7:30 a.m. and 5:30 p.m., by visiting

www.papropertytaxrelief.com, or by contacting any of my district offices.

Individuals who qualified for a rebate in 2006 will automatically receive a form for this year's program and do not need to sign up for the mailing. If you have any questions about the program or need help in submitting an application, please contact any of my district offices.

While this expansion is a great benefit to a number of Pennsylvanians, it is not the final solution to the property tax issue. We still need to do more to ensure that all homeowners see a substantial reduction in property taxes, and I look forward to working with my colleagues to examine new options to ease the burden of rising property taxes for all homeowners.





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Assisting Military Families

Pennsylvania is home to thousands of soldiers who bravely defend our country and fight to protect our freedoms. However, many soldiers and their families face serious financial burdens as a result of their service.

To assist these service members and their families, I recently voted for legislation that established the Military Family Relief Assistance Program. The military family relief assistance program is funded through annual voluntary contributions on Pennsylvania Personal Income Tax Forms. Beginning last year, income tax forms have a space for individuals to donate money to the fund.

Pennsylvania Personal Income Tax Forms will provide a check-off box giving individuals the opportunity to donate part of their tax refund. The donation will be deducted directly from the individual's tax return and will be used to provide basic necessities such as food, clothing and medical care for soldiers and their families.

In addition to the Military Family

Relief Assistance Program, the General Assembly also approved a package of legislation to benefit our National Guard members. The package includes legislation to extend health care benefits for deployed soldiers who are full-time students, extend death benefits to families of National Guard members killed in the line of duty, and provide additional time for deployed soldiers to be eligible for student financial aid.

The Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency also offers loan forgiveness for service members. This armed forces loan forgiveness program provides a one-time loan forgiveness benefit up to \$2,500 for student borrowers who served in the Armed Forces in an active duty status after September 11, 2001.

Our fighting men and women in the Armed Forces deserve a great deal of appreciation for keeping us safe from those who wish to harm us. I am proud that the General Assembly has recognized their dedicated service by providing these benefits to members of our military.



Senator Gordner with Dusty Rhoades of Sunbury at a recent news conference to announce plans for a new veterans' center in Northumberland County.