



Capitol Correspondence

from State Senator

John Blake



Serving Northeast Pennsylvania

JUNE 2012

■ PAVING THE ROAD TO ECONOMIC RECOVERY



Lack of executive focus and leadership combined with years of legislative inaction and budgetary underfunding has driven our state's transportation infrastructure into a state of disrepair. This undermines the economic vitality and the economic competitiveness of our great Commonwealth and it compromises public safety.

Pennsylvania has nearly 8,500 miles of roads in poor condition; we have the 4th oldest bridge inventory in the nation; and, of our 25,000 bridges, over 5,000 are structurally deficient. In Lackawanna County alone, nearly 100 of our 480 bridges have structural problems; six have been forced to close; and 28 others have posted

weight restrictions. The numbers are even worse for Luzerne and Monroe Counties with a combined 231 structurally deficient bridges.

Save for education, public safety and our essential human services programs, there is no other function of government that should command more attention than that of transportation and public works infrastructure. Inaction carries a cost and adds danger.

Earlier this month, I joined my Senate Democratic colleagues to announce a new plan to address our

infrastructure woes; to generate positive economic activity; and to create jobs for Pennsylvanians – all without raising taxes.

At the core of our plan is a new tax incentive program that would allow the Commonwealth Financing Authority, PENNVEST and our mass transit agencies to issue up to \$1.5 billion in new bonds over 5 years to fund critical system upgrades. The principal on these bonds would be paid from already earmarked Marcellus Shale tax revenues and local contributions for mass transit projects. Further, unlike the typical return on investment to bond purchasers, for these bonds such returns would, in part, be paid in the form of tax credits. Using tax credits to compensate bond holders serves to reduce the debt service obligations of the issuing agencies by more than half of what they would otherwise pay.

Due to the current, strict federal requirements on the tolling of interstates, PennDOT and local transit agencies are without hundreds of millions of dollars of investment capital. The plan put forth recently by the Senate Democratic Caucus proposes to address this shortfall through a securitization of future federal highway funding to allow our state to accelerate transportation investment now. This financing model, referred to as GARVEE bonds, has been used in 35 other states.

If there is any question about what prudent public infrastructure investment can do, consider that every

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PAVING THE ROAD TO ECONOMIC RECOVERY

\$1 billion in highway expenditures supports over 25,000 jobs and every \$1 billion investment in water and wastewater treatment infrastructure results in total net output of between \$2.87 and \$3.46 billion while creating nearly 27,000 jobs and adding \$82.4 million to state and local tax coffers.

Last year, the Governor's own Transportation Funding Advisory Commission concluded that, "Pennsylvania's transportation infrastructure is in urgent need of repair and reinvestment." To his considerable credit, PennDOT Secretary Barry Schoch has traveled the state seeking support for the implementation of the Commission's findings – but the decision to implement them must be made in Harrisburg.

One suggestion from the Governor's Commission was to uncap the state's oil franchise tax. If allowed to float with market conditions as it was intended to do when it was first enacted, it would immediately net \$1.4 billion for Pennsylvania that could be invested in transportation infrastructure. The only beneficiaries of inaction on this matter are oil companies and, as we try to foster robust, sustainable job growth in the wake of deep recession, I believe most citizens of Pennsylvania would agree that oil companies don't need help right now. Pennsylvania's working class taxpayers deserve public interest governance from Harrisburg. They

also deserve better infrastructure and the economic opportunities that arise from building it.

Legislators in the Senate and the House on both sides of the aisle stand ready and willing to make the decisions necessary to advance an immediate state commitment to upgrade our transportation infrastructure. We call on the Governor to lead on this important public safety and economic development issue and to hold a special session of the legislature to deal with it this summer.

The gridlock in Washington, D.C., where the last Transportation Authorization bill expired in

September 2009 – and where Congress has been fumbling with extensions since then – need not be replicated in Harrisburg. We have tools at our disposal which can and should be mobilized to improve our transportation and public works infrastructure. We can demonstrate to our citizens that we can get big things done in this state, put our people to work, improve the bottom line for our engineers, construction contractors and material suppliers; and strengthen our economy by building highways and bridges to properly serve a 21st century economy. **Let's get to work!**

22ND DISTRICT TRANSPORTATION STATISTICS

Lackawanna County:

- 415 State Owned Bridges - 3 closed, 10 posted and 63 structurally deficient
- 223 miles of roadway considered to be in poor condition according to the International Roughness Index (IRI).

Luzerne County:

- 559 State Owned Bridges – 0 closed bridges, 10 posted and 108 structurally deficient
- 119 miles of roadway considered to be in poor condition according to the IRI.

Monroe County:

- 366 State Owned Bridges - 123 structurally deficient (second highest percentage of structurally deficient bridges in Pennsylvania)
- 167 miles of roadway considered to be in poor condition according to the IRI.

Source: PennDOT

■ MILITARY INSTALLATIONS AND BASE DEVELOPMENT CAUCUS UPDATE

In addition to our 11 world-class military installations, we have remarkable defense industry partners throughout the state. If we fail to properly position ourselves in advance of federal defense spending cuts, we risk losing business to other states as well as the tens of thousands of defense-related, family

sustaining jobs related to that business.

The 4 co-chairs of our bicameral, bipartisan caucus recently had a very productive meeting with the Governor concerning prospective federal Base Realignment and Closure Commissions (BRAC) by the U.S. Department of Defense. We need to work now to position Pennsylvania

when the proposed base closures happen in 2015. The Governor agrees with our caucus on the urgency of this issue and we are hopeful that he will reestablish the Base Development Committee to coordinate statewide activities to protect our installations and sustain their missions in service to the US military.

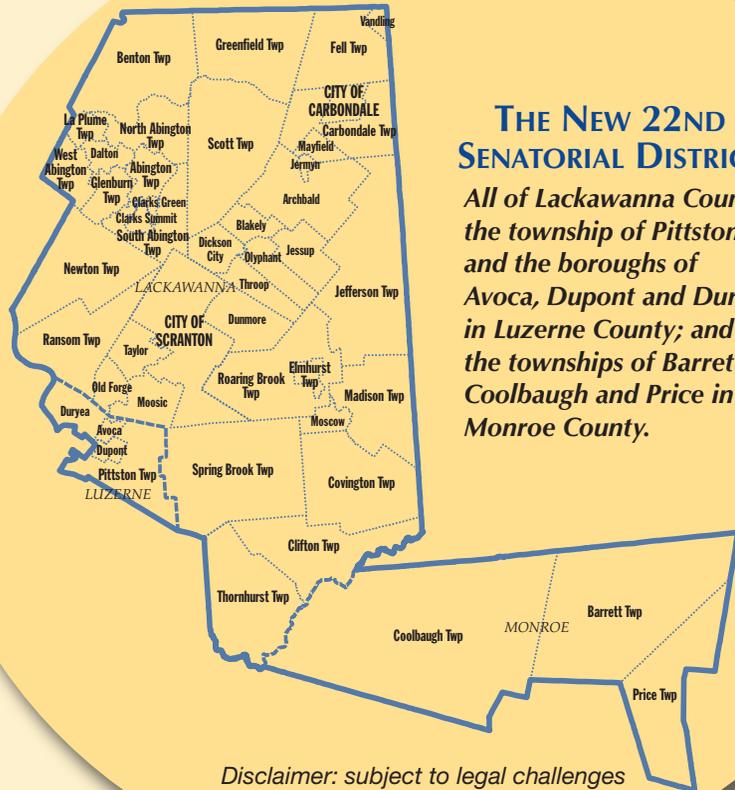
■ REDISTRICTING

On June 8, the Legislative Reapportionment Commission adopted a final version of the reapportionment plan that will set the boundaries of our state legislative districts for the next ten years.

I was pleased that my 22nd Senatorial District remained mostly unchanged and that I will be able to continue to proudly represent all of Lackawanna County and also continue my strong working relationship with parts of both Luzerne and Monroe Counties.

While my district was very minimally affected, I still have very serious concerns about the severe gerrymandering contained in these maps – especially in western Pennsylvania. The final map is supposed to represent a shift in population, but unfortunately these maps more closely reflect a shift in the political will of the majority party in Harrisburg.

There is a 30-day window to challenge the new redistricting plan. If that happens, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court will either uphold or reject it.



THE NEW 22ND SENATORIAL DISTRICT

All of Lackawanna County; the township of Pittston and the boroughs of Avoca, Dupont and Duryea in Luzerne County; and the townships of Barrett, Coolbaugh and Price in Monroe County.

Disclaimer: subject to legal challenges before the PA Supreme Court

■ 2ND ANNUAL CONFERENCE ON AGING

In early April, I had the opportunity to speak at the 2nd Annual Conference on Aging presented by the University of Scranton and The Commonwealth Medical College (TCMC).

This annual conference is a wonderful forum for all of us to share and exchange ideas on how best to serve Pennsylvania's senior citizens who are facing evermore difficult challenges.

Pennsylvania currently ranks 5th in the country in terms of residents over 65 years of age and in the 22nd Senate District alone there are 43,699 residents over 65 years old, which accounts for 17 percent of the entire population.

It is worth adding that data from good research, such as that conducted at the University of Scranton and TCMC, is key to informing good public policy decisions and the proper

allocation of state resources to strengthen and sustain an integrated social and health care support network for our aging population.

It is my sincere hope that, as we continue to see improvement in our state's economy, Pennsylvania will be better positioned to provide essential, quality services and care not only to our seniors but to the members of their families who are often the key providers of that care.

Congratulations to Tobyhanna Army Depot on its 100th Anniversary!

The Tobyhanna Army Depot is one of the main economic drivers in our region and has the distinction of being the largest employer in the Pocono Northeast region of the state.

The Northeastern Pennsylvania Alliance's certified economic

model reported that Tobyhanna's total regional annual economic impact is \$2.8 billion and its presence alone creates 18,000 regional jobs.

The irreplaceable impact of Tobyhanna Army Depot on the Northeastern Pennsylvania

economy has been key to our development for the past 100 years and it is my sincere hope that this world-class facility continues to be a national model for the next 100 years. Congratulations to the management and to the outstanding workforce at Tobyhanna.

■ SENATE DEMOCRATIC POLICY COMMITTEE VISITS SCRANTON

Last month, I welcomed members of the Senate Democratic Policy Committee to Lackawanna College to meet with area human service providers to discuss current public policy issues and the adverse effect a proposed 20 percent state funding reduction would have on the people they serve.

Continued state budget cuts not only affect local social service organizations, but they also the levels of service they can provide to individuals and their families who rely so heavily on quality services from providers in North-eastern Pennsylvania.

It was very important for my Senate colleagues to visit my district and hear entreaties from our local human service providers about the challenges they are facing on the front lines with limited resources and increased demand.



■ VOTER ID LAW IS AN INSULT TO MANY PA VOTERS AND ELECTION WORKERS

The right to vote is the most fundamental right of our democracy. People have died fighting for this right. The Republican majority in Harrisburg has decided to make this right more difficult to exercise for our seniors, veterans, college students and persons with disabilities.

House Bill 934 requires all voters to present photo identification or some other ID from a very narrow list of other accepted forms of identification each time they vote.

Not only is this law costly – it is estimated to cost our taxpayers between \$4.5 million and \$11 million in the first year and nearly \$2.5 million per year going forward – but it is unnecessary because it attempts to solve a voter fraud problem that simply does not exist in Pennsylvania. A U.S. Department of Justice statistic has shown that, since 2008, more than 20 million votes were cast in Pennsylvania and there were only four convictions of voter fraud. This is an expensive solution to a problem that does not exist. It not only insults dedicated voters and county election workers, but it imposes upon some of our citizens added inconvenience and personal costs wholly unnecessary to achieve what can only be described as a very marginal enhancement to the validity and the integrity of our current voting and election systems.

The provisions of the Voter ID law will go into full effect in this November's election so it is imperative that everyone is aware of the acceptable forms of identification needed to cast a vote.

The following forms of identification will be accepted in order to vote

- ID issued by the United States government that includes your name, a photograph, and an expiration date that is not expired
- U.S. military ID – active duty and retired military (a military or veteran's ID must designate an expiration date or designate that the expiration date is indefinite). Military dependents' ID must contain an expiration date
- ID issued by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania that includes your name, a photograph, and an expiration date that is not expired
- An ID issued by the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) that is not more than 12 months past the expiration date
 - A valid-without-photo driver's license or a valid-without-photo ID card issued by PennDOT for individuals who have a religious objection to being photographed
 - Employee ID issued by a municipality of Pennsylvania that includes your name, a photograph, and an expiration date that is not expired
 - ID issued by an accredited Pennsylvania public or private institution of higher learning that includes your name, a photograph, and an expiration date that is not expired
 - ID issued by a Pennsylvania care facility that includes your name, a photograph, and an expiration date that is not expired



If you have any questions about the identification needed to vote, do not hesitate to contact one of my district offices or visit your nearest PennDOT facility.

■ ANNUAL LEGISLATIVE BREAKFAST

On February 17th, I was honored to host more than 70 local government officials and school administrators from the 22nd District for my second annual legislative breakfast at the Greenwood Hose Company on Birney Avenue in Moosic.

This was a great opportunity to hear from those I represent on the issues of importance to them and to allow me an opportunity to discuss the local impacts of the education and human service cuts proposed by the Corbett Administration in the 2012-13 budget address in February.

I share with local officials similar concerns – as well as similar aspirations for the future of Pennsylvania for the citizens and communities of my district. I hold my annual legislative breakfast at this time of year so I can be fully informed on the true impacts of the Governor’s proposed budget on families, schools and communities in



Northeastern Pennsylvania.

Decision-makers on the front lines in our local communities and in our schools not only inform the questions I raise to members of the

Governor’s cabinet during Senate Appropriation hearings but they inform the larger public policy debates we conduct in Harrisburg.

■ FIRST INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS FORUM SURPASSES EXPECTATIONS

It was my pleasure to be joined by numerous state and federal business experts to discuss the benefits of helping local businesses grow internationally at my first annual

International Business Development Forum at Marywood University.

I was very pleased with the turnout and participation at the forum and expect it to be an annual tradition

because the market and products are always changing and our local businesses need to know of the opportunities and support available to them statewide, nationally and globally.

By increasing export capacity and establishing new connections between Pennsylvania companies and customers worldwide, Pennsylvania businesses become more competitive in the global marketplace, which translates into job creation and job retention here in Pennsylvania.

The International Business Development Forum afforded local businessmen and women an opportunity to learn about the benefits of growing their businesses internationally and learning of the valuable financial and technical assistance available through both state and federal government programs that support export sales.





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Constituent Services

My offices take great pride in assisting constituents. We will do our best to help anyone who calls, writes, emails or visits my District and Harrisburg offices.

If you have a question on any state government issue, we'll try to answer it for you. And, if we don't have an answer, we'll work to get you one. If you have a problem or concern with any state government agency, please tell us about it. And, of course, your input is always welcome and appreciated on any legislative issue as I work to represent the interests of the people of the 22nd District.

FREE ASSISTANCE PROVIDED IN SENATOR BLAKE'S OFFICES

Absentee Ballot Application • Birth Certificate Application • Death Certificate Application
Criminal Record Check Application • Consumer Complaint Forms • Hunting License • Notary Public Applications
Notarized Documents • Prescription Assistance Applications • Pennsylvania Department of Revenue
Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency (PHEAA) • Public Utility Commission Complaint Form
Property Tax & Rent Rebate Forms • State Income Tax Forms • Voter Registration Application
PennDOT License Renewals • Titles • Handicapped Placards