



Capitol Correspondence

from State Senator **John Blake**



Serving Northeast Pennsylvania

FALL 2011

*Dear Friends
& Neighbors,*

Welcome to the first edition of the Senator John P. Blake newsletter. Less than a year ago, the people of the 22nd District entrusted John Blake with the privilege of representing them as state senator for the 22nd Senatorial District – serving all of Lackawanna County and parts of Luzerne and Monroe Counties.

Senator Blake earned the attention and respect of his Senate colleagues on both sides of the aisle and had an effective start to his first term. He was a reliable voice for Pennsylvania residents during Appropriations Committee hearings in March as well as in committee and floor debates on the state budget until its passage on June 30.

Unfortunately, the slow-to-recover national and state economies set the stage for a very difficult budget cycle and the Senate Democratic minority did not participate in all budget negotiations which were led by Governor Corbett and Republican majorities in the House and Senate. The difficulty and the consequences of the deep cuts included in the adopted 2011-12 state budget are still being felt in the 22nd district.

Local K-12 public schools across the 22nd District saw a combined funding reduction of \$18.3 million, putting enormous pressure on local districts to cut staff, services and costs while fighting to hold the line on local property taxes.



Senator Blake worked with his Senate colleagues to restore some funding for the Commonwealth Medical College but the cuts to public schools, higher education, human services, housing, hospitals, economic development and local government programs were deep and will be felt for some time.

Beyond the state budget, Senator Blake was prime sponsor of nine Senate Bills, including one, Senate Bill 845, that was eventually amended into House Bill 488 and signed into law by the Governor as Act 43 of 2011. House Bill 488 enables, among other things, a land transfer between the state and the County of Lackawanna Transit System (COLTS). This land transfer is important because it enables COLTS to proceed with a new

procurement process for the construction of a \$14 million Scranton Intermodal Center on Lackawanna Avenue in downtown Scranton. This legislation had been initiated previously by Rep. Ken Smith but it never successfully passed the General Assembly to be signed into law.

Senator Blake also signed on to 92 other Senate Bills as a co-sponsor. Among these there were a number of notable pieces of legislation signed into law by Governor Corbett including the ban of 'bath salts' that had become a significant public safety threat here in Northeastern Pennsylvania and a bill sustaining the valuable Industry Partnerships job training program. Senator Blake also supported the fund raising efforts of Scranton

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■ Luzerne County Airport Interconnector

Senator Blake worked closely with state Rep. Mike Carroll (D-Avooca) to advance plans for the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton International Airport highway connector project.

The project will reconfigure the Interstate 81 exits for the airport, creating one exit in each direction, instead of the two that currently exist. It will also construct a .85-mile access road from the existing airport entrance off I-81, over the Pennsylvania Turnpike and connecting to Commerce Boulevard in the Grimes Industrial Park so trucks will have better access to I-81 and alleviate congestion in Dupont. With unemployment near 9 percent in Northeastern Pennsylvania and our transportation infrastructure showing its age, projects such as this \$42 million project are crucial to providing short term job growth as well as long term public safety along our highway systems.



Senator Blake joined Rep. Carroll at a public meeting in Dupont.

■ Working to Retain Military Jobs in Northeastern PA



Senator Blake met with Dave Kryskoe at the Tobyhanna Army Depot.

Working closely with state Sen. Richard Alloway (R-Adams/Franklin/York), Senator Blake announced the formation of a new bipartisan, bicameral Military

Installations and Base Development Caucus to protect Pennsylvania's 64,000 defense-related jobs and its world-class military bases and facilities across the state. This issue is of significant concern to

Northeastern Pennsylvania because it is home to Tobyhanna Army Depot, which is the largest, full-service electronics maintenance facility in the Department of Defense and employs nearly 6,000 people.

Tobyhanna Army Depot is estimated to produce a total regional annual economic impact of \$2.8 billion and its presence alone sustains 18,000 regional jobs. If the legislature is serious about saving and creating jobs, it needs to focus its attention on Pennsylvania's military facilities and our many defense-industry businesses. The U.S. Department of Defense may be convening another Base Realignment and Closure Commission in 2015. It is imperative that Pennsylvania focus now on ensuring that the jobs, the missions and the economic activity generated by our military bases are not lost to other states.



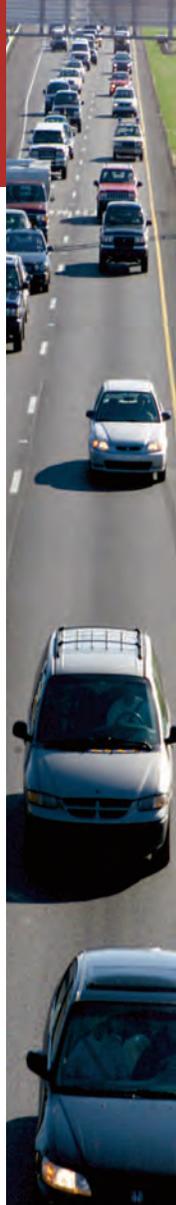
■ Congratulations to Monroe County on its 175th Anniversary!

Senator Blake joined Senator David Argall at the July Commissioners' meeting to present Commissioner Chairperson Suzanne McCool, Vice-Chairperson Theresa Merli, and Commissioner Janet Weidensaul with a proclamation marking the 175th Anniversary of Monroe County.

■ Northeast Regional Cancer Institute Receives State Grant for Marcellus Shale Health Study



In early July, Senator Blake announced a \$75,000 state grant for the Northeast Regional Cancer Institute to conduct a health survey in the areas of Northeastern Pennsylvania affected by Marcellus Shale drilling. The study, which will be conducted by Cancer Institute researchers, will determine the current health status of the population in Bradford, Lackawanna, Luzerne, Lycoming, Pike, Sullivan, Susquehanna, Tioga, Wayne and Wyoming counties and establish an important baseline of data for future comparisons and research regarding public health in the areas impacted by the emergence of Marcellus Shale drilling operations.



■ Transportation Funding Commission

The importance of our transportation system to the state's economy cannot be overstated. Modern transportation networks facilitate the movement of workers to jobs, students to schools, consumers to stores and products to markets. But Pennsylvania's transportation system is aged and in a state of disrepair. This crisis is a result of several factors: the sheer scale and scope of Pennsylvania's transportation infrastructure – we have more miles of road than 45 other states; years of underfunded or deferred maintenance; and greater fuel efficiency in autos generating less revenue for state highway investments. All of these factors have constrained our ability to support, maintain and upgrade our roads, bridges and mass transit systems.

A Transportation Funding Advisory Commission was established by the Corbett administration. The Commission was chaired by Secretary of Transportation Barry Schoch. The Commission has proposed a combination of savings and revenue enhancements designed to help fill a 10-year funding gap estimated at \$7.2 billion.

Did You Know?

22nd District Transportation Facts:

- More than 20% of Lackawanna County's 480 bridges have structural problems
- Nearly 25% of Luzerne County's bridges are structurally deficient
- 30% of Monroe County's 420 bridges are structurally deficient. At 30%, Monroe County's rate is the 2nd highest in the state after Potter County (38 percent)

STAYING IN TOUCH



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You can follow Sen. John P. Blake on **Facebook** (search "Senator John P. Blake").

For all the latest news, check out the senator's website **www.senatorblake.com** where you can also sign up to receive distribution of his periodic **e-newsletter**.

Dear Friends & Neighbors,

Tomorrow and the Everhart Museum through a minor legislative adjustment to the state's Liquor Control Act on special occasion liquor permits.

Other noteworthy legislation supported by Senator Blake over his first eight months in office included:

- **House Bill 377** – Removing a costly mandate on homebuilders and home buyers requiring sprinkler systems in newly constructed homes;
- **Senate Bill 314** – An effort to protect children and the traveling public by making texting while driving a primary offense;
- And numerous bills that would place a reasonable impact fee on the Marcellus Shale natural gas drilling industry as well as up-grade regulations imposed upon natural gas gathering and pipeline companies.

While Senator Blake voted against a state budget that placed an unfair burden on the middle class and cut services and funding from those most in need, there were other legislative initiatives that he opposed because they were poorly devised or because they could harm the interests of low-and middle-income families. These included so called "tort reform" (**Senate Bill 3**); school choice vouchers (**Senate Bill 1**) and a Welfare Code (**House Bill 960**) that granted too much executive authority over essential state subsidies for health care services to seniors and persons with disabilities.

Senator Blake's first eight months in Harrisburg were productive but many of the challenges we face to restore our Commonwealth to robust economic growth remain unmet. He will continue to focus tireless work on ensuring the people of the 22nd district – and throughout the state – have jobs and economic opportunity to support and sustain the highest quality of life for themselves and their families.



■ Flood Assistance & Recovery



This was Main Street in Duryea on Friday, Sept. 9, 2011.

After one of the worst floods in the history of Pennsylvania, our families, friends and neighbors throughout Northeastern Pennsylvania and around the state need our help more than ever. Their homes were ruined, precious and personal valuables destroyed and millions of dollars in damages were reported due to the horrendous flooding caused by Tropical Storm Lee.

As the cleanup process continues, it is imperative that those affected by flooding know where to turn for assistance. Anyone that incurred damage from the flood should assess and document their damages and compile estimates so that financial assistance can be expedited.

Anyone with flood insurance should first contact their insurance agents or the National Flood Insurance Program at **1-800-427-4661**.

The Pennsylvania Emergency Management Association has set up a website with information on how to report damages and lists state and federal programs that provide financial assistance to those affected.

Another useful site in assessing damages and looking for assistance is the federal government's **Disaster Assistance.gov** page where residents can take a questionnaire that will tell them what programs they qualify for based on their answers. The Federal Emergency Management Agency can also be reached by phone at **1-800-621-3362**.

The state has set up a Website, **www.pahousingsearch.com**, to link displaced homeowners or renters with landlords who have available properties. Those without Internet service can dial **1-877-428-8844**.

Locally, there are many organizations and government programs that are available to assist in their recovery efforts. The Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber has a website **www.gwb recovery.org** to help local businesses recover from flood damage and allow people to volunteer to assist in the cleanup and recovery.

Volunteers can also sign up to help at Pennsylvania's ReadyPA website **www.readypa.org**.

If you are unable to volunteer in the cleanup but would still like to help, the American Red Cross is currently seeking donations to help local families. If you wish to donate, visit **www.redcross.org**, or call the Lackawanna County chapter at **(570) 207-0100** or the Wyoming Valley chapter at **(570) 823-7161**.

Let me express deep gratitude to the hundreds of volunteers who have been working to assist their neighbors in need and let me also express deep gratitude to the fire departments and other private businesses throughout the District who have been so responsive in the recovery effort.

If I can be of any assistance do not hesitate to contact one of my offices.

■ Marcellus Shale Commission Report

The Governor's Marcellus Shale Advisory Commission released a report Friday, July 22. The report contains 96 policy recommendations for managing the natural gas drilling industry in Pennsylvania. The Commission's report recognizes a broad diversity of the industry's impacts including infrastructure, health and human services, environment, housing, criminal justice, public safety, landowner concerns and emergency management.

Senator Blake continues to have concerns about the lack of an appropriate balance between the stated positions of the Corbett Administration, the plans and expectations of the industry and the urgent imperative to protect public safety, water quality and our natural assets.

Governor Corbett has pledged not to sign a natural gas severance tax. Pennsylvania will, therefore, remain the only major gas-producing state in America without one. The Governor

has stated that he would support a "local impact fee" to offset the costs to local governments related to drilling impacts. Senator Blake agrees that a reasonable fee that does not undermine our economic competitiveness is appropriate. Further, while some of the fees raised from the industry must be distributed back to the communities immediately affected by drilling operations, he holds that the industry's impact is statewide and the benefits of investing revenues collected should be statewide as well.

In the wake of the Commission's report, many questions remain. What would an impact fee look like? How should revenues be distributed? How much should the impact fee be? How can local

governments determine the impacts of drilling and what local costs should be substantiated in order to receive state subsidies? These and other serious public policy questions on this matter will be heavily debated in the Fall of 2011.



One concern related to the imposition of an impact fee involves the concept of "preemption." This recommendation would require a municipality to give up some of the authority of their local zoning ordinances in order to receive any share of the impact fees. Another recommendation calls for implementation of a procedure for compensating holdout landowners while keeping them from blocking the development of the gas

from leased properties adjacent or contiguous to them, a concept known as "forced pooling." Senator Blake opposes both of these recommendations.



The Commonwealth *at Your Service*

■ Electric Choice

Utility rate caps are expiring and you can choose the company that generates your electricity – also known as your electric supplier. This means you have the ability to switch to a competing supplier who can offer the lowest price, or provide a specific service you want such as green or renewable energy. To shop for electricity rates, go to www.papowerswitch.com

■ PA529 College Savings Plan

Saving for college is a strategic investment that will pay dividends for your children well into the future. Sponsored by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and administered by the Treasury Department, the Pennsylvania 529 College Savings Program offers two plans and many

investment options that have helped over 150,000 families of all income levels answer one of their biggest financial concerns/how to afford college. Learn about 529 plan basics, including the tax benefits, financial aid impact, and setting savings goals. www.pa529.com/webinars.html

■ Connecting Small Businesses and Local Governments

COSTARS is a state program that creates new sales opportunities for small businesses and helps many local government entities reduce contract costs. To learn more, please go to www.dgs.state.pa.us/costars/site/default.a

■ Solar Project Funding

The Commonwealth Financing Authority (CFA) is accepting

applications requesting funding under the Solar Energy Program to encourage further development of solar energy projects in Pennsylvania. The application period will open on September 1, 2011, and will remain open until October 31, 2011. Please review the Solar Energy Program guidelines thoroughly before applying. http://www.newpa.com/sites/default/files/uploads/solarenergy_program_guidelines_2009_2.pdf. Eligible applicants are encouraged to contact the Dept. of Community & Economic Development at **(717) 720-1401** to discuss potential projects before commencing the application process. It is important to note that the state will approve only those projects that are ready to move forward within six months of application submission.



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Several issues and legislative initiatives will dominate the discussion:

■ **Legislative Redistricting**

Pennsylvania stands to lose one of its 19 Congressional House seats due to population changes, so the boundaries will change to take effect before next year's congressional election. Boundaries for districts in our state General Assembly will also change. The state has unveiled a website www.redistricting.state.pa.us to provide information about of the redistricting process in Pennsylvania as well as access to the geography and population data used for redistricting, interactive maps, and more.

■ **Marcellus Shale**

The General Assembly will likely tackle legislation dealing with the Marcellus Shale issue, including the adoption of revenue generation, environmental protection measures, public safety, public health, enforcement and oversight.

■ **School Vouchers**

While Senator Blake does not support S.B. 1 in its current form and other proposals related to school vouchers, it is likely that school choice and voucher proposals will again be debated this Fall. Senator Blake advocates an increase in the Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) to leverage greater private investment in school choice.

■ **Sale of State Liquor Stores**

The Legislature may consider a proposal to privatize the state-owned liquor stores. Senator Blake opposes the privatization effort as currently envisioned by House Republicans and would rather see changes to the Liquor Control system that can assure greater customer satisfaction and enhanced revenue opportunities for the benefit of all Pennsylvania taxpayers.

■ **Transportation Funding**

In the wake of the Transportation Funding Advisory Commission report, the General Assembly may consider plans to generate much-needed revenue for transportation improvements.



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