

Senate News Brief

from Senate Republicans

"This bill will help senior citizens who have very moderate incomes. I think it's time to pass this plan and get help to people who really need the help."

– **Senate Majority Leader David Brightbill (R-Lebanon)**, on the Pennsylvania Taxpayer Relief Act, passed by the Senate on May 2.

Preview

SENATE RETURNS TO VOTING SESSION MONDAY, MAY 22

THE SENATE RETURNS TO VOTING SESSION Monday, May 22. The Senate is expected to consider two bills aimed at supporting organ donation in Pennsylvania. House Bill 153 would provide a tax credit to employers who grant a paid leave of absence to employees for the purpose of bone marrow or organ donation. House Bill 1834 allows PENNDOT to provide organ procurement organizations electronic access to the driver licensing database for the purpose of confirming an individual's organ donor status.

Review

SENATE APPROVES BIPARTISAN PROPERTY TAX REFORM PLAN

THE SENATE APPROVED a bipartisan property tax relief measure May 2 that would lower school property taxes for most Pennsylvanians and provide additional relief to senior citizens with moderate fixed incomes.

House Bill 39, the Pennsylvania Taxpayer Relief Act, was the result of a Conference Committee agreement among Republicans and Democrats from the Senate and House of Representatives. The property tax relief plan is awaiting action in the House. For details of the Pennsylvania Taxpayer Relief Act, please see *In the Spotlight* and *Fast Facts*, below.

SENATE SENDS VOTER ACCESSIBILITY ACT TO GOVERNOR

LEGISLATION TO ENSURE that seniors, disabled citizens, and servicemen and women have improved access to ballots and the polls was approved by the Senate on May 3 and sent to the governor for consideration.

Senate Bill 999 – the Voter Accessibility Act, sponsored by **Senate State Government Committee Chairman Charles Lemmond (R-Luzerne)** – would extend the deadline for receipt of absentee ballots cast by military electors. It would also ensure that every voter has the right to vote in a polling location that is free from intimidation and harassment, and is not located in the basement of a party official's home or in a bar or campaign office. It would also impose penalties on any individual who assists someone that he or she knows is not a qualified absentee elector in filling out an absentee ballot, and define what constitutes a valid vote under various types of voting systems (paper ballot, optical scan, and punch card).

EXPANSION OF FARMLAND PRESERVATION EFFORT SENT TO GOVERNOR

LEGISLATION THAT WOULD ENHANCE Pennsylvania's farmland preservation law to help farmers and preserve open space was approved by the Senate on May 1 and sent to the governor.

Senate Bill 723, sponsored by **Sen. Noah Wenger (R-Lancaster)**, would permit and encourage non-profit organizations such as private land trusts to partner with governmental entities in purchasing agricultural conservation easements. By permitting private, non-profit entities to join the Commonwealth in preserving agricultural lands, new funding can be made available and the combination of public/private monies can be leveraged to preserve more farmland.

The measure also makes it possible for more counties to take part by giving them the option to reduce the minimum acreage requirement. The bill is part of the "Farmers First" legislative package introduced last year by Senate Appropriations Chairman Noah Wenger and **Senate Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee Chairman Mike Waugh (R-York)**.

BILL CRACKING DOWN ON HIRING ILLEGAL WORKERS SENT TO GOVERNOR

THE SENATE APPROVED LEGISLATION MAY 3 cracking down on employers who use illegal immigrant labor on projects funded with state taxpayer assistance.

House Bill 2319 would require that recipients pay back state grants they receive if they knowingly employ, or knowingly permit their contractors to use, illegal immigrant labor on the project. The legislation also would impose a penalty interest rate

on any state loans provided. The bill was amended and approved May 1 by the Senate Labor and Industry Committee, chaired by **Sen. Joe Scarnati (R-Jefferson)**.

The measure would not apply if grant or loan recipients can demonstrate that they required a contractor to certify compliance with federal immigration law and if they can establish that they notified the appropriate federal authorities of any knowledge they may have had of a contractor hiring illegal immigrants.

The House concurred in Senate Amendments and House Bill 2319 is currently on the governor's desk awaiting action.

SENATE APPROVES VICTIM IMPACT PANELS FOR DUI OFFENSES

THE SENATE APPROVED LEGISLATION MAY 2 to create victim impact panels as part of the sentencing procedure for DUI offenders. The bill is now awaiting the governor's signature.

House Bill 15 was approved by the Senate Transportation Committee, chaired by **Sen. Roger Madigan (R-Bradford)**, earlier this year. Victim Impact Panels aim to reduce DUI recidivism by providing a non-confrontational forum for DUI victims, friends and family to speak with DUI offenders about the consequences of drinking and driving, and the impact the crime has had on their lives. The panels, created in cooperation with Mothers Against Drunk Driving, will be administered at the county level.

SENATE ACTS TO GIVE LOCAL GOVERNMENTS GREATER VOICE, FEWER MANDATES

THE SENATE PASSED TWO MEASURES MAY 1 that would give local governments a greater voice in state government and reduce time-consuming paperwork.

Senate Bill 261, sponsored by **Sen. Bob Robbins (R-50)**, would elevate the head of its Center for Local Government Services within the Department of Community and Economic Development to Deputy Secretary status. As the one-stop shop for local governments, the Center provides a full range of technical and financial assistance to municipalities and counties.

Senate Bill 810, introduced by **Sen. Joe Conti (R-Bucks)**, would repeal an outdated mandate for DCED to collect and file municipal budget reports that local governments are no longer required to forward to them. Senate Bill 810 would complete a six-bill package, five of which have already been enacted, to reduce needless paperwork and mandates for local governments.

In the Spotlight

THE PENNSYLVANIA TAXPAYER RELIEF ACT would give voters in school districts the option to increase their Earned Income Tax (EIT) rate or levy a Personal Income Tax in exchange for a reduction in their property taxes. It would also implement a back-end referendum – voter controls on future property tax increases – in every school district across the state. The mandatory back-end referendum requirement is crucial to holding the line on school spending because it gives taxpayers the power to reject tax increases that they think are excessive or which school administrators fail to justify.

The size of the more than 30-year-old Property Tax and Rent Rebate Program is more than doubled – with payments increasing by \$200 million and more than 422,000 senior citizens being newly eligible under the program – for a total of more than 760,000 seniors.

By determining a school district's mix of local taxes at the ballot box rather than in Harrisburg, the Taxpayer Relief Act empowers taxpayers to make informed decisions about how their school districts raise revenues.

Fast Facts

THE PENNSYLVANIA TAXPAYER RELIEF ACT

- Increases income eligibility requirements for the popular Property Tax Rent Rebate Program from \$15,000 to \$35,000 (excluding half of Social Security) – enabling more than 761,000 seniors to take advantage of the program.
- Implements the back-end referendum – voter controls on future property tax increases – in every school district across the state.
- Requires school boards to hold front-end referenda offering homeowners a property tax reduction of at least 50 percent of the maximum homestead exclusion, and gives taxpayers the final say in local taxing decisions.

Question or comments? Contact the Senate Republican Communications Office at senaterepublicancommunicationsoffice@pasen.gov or call 717-787-6725. Current and archived News Briefs are also available online at www.pasenategop.com.