

# State Senator **Jane Earll** 49th Senatorial District Capitol Report



SUMMER 2005

Dear Friend,

I hope you've had a great summer. This newsletter is designed to keep you updated on recent legislative activity in the state Capitol.

Please feel free to visit my website at [www.senatorearll.com](http://www.senatorearll.com) or contact either of my offices listed on the back for more information on any legislative proposals or state programs.

Sincerely,



Senator Jane Earll

## Finance Committee Update

As chairwoman of the Senate Finance Committee, I have an opportunity to help shape the Commonwealth's tax policies. I am able to provide input on all tax-related legislation that comes through the committee, greatly influencing significant programs that will have long term, statewide impact.

Here are a few of the important bills that my committee studied and approved:

### **INSTALLMENT PAYMENTS FOR SCHOOL PROPERTY TAXES**

Paying school taxes in an annual lump sum can be difficult for those on tight budgets. Allowing taxpayers to make smaller payments periodically can make the tax burden more manageable. The Senate Finance Committee approved Senate Bill 709 to require school districts statewide to initiate installment payment plans by the 2006-07 school year. Nothing in this legislation would

prohibit school districts from continuing to offer early tax payment discounts. Discounts on taxes paid early would also continue to be offered. The measure was passed by the full Senate and sent to the House of Representatives.

### **MILITARY FAMILY RELIEF ASSISTANCE**

In recognition of the service and sacrifice made by members of the military and their families, the committee approved legislation to provide a tax check-off for Military Family Relief Assistance.

House Bill 1180 creates a check-off (beginning with next year's tax form) allowing taxpayers to *contribute a portion of their state Personal Income Tax refund* to the Military Family Relief Assistance Fund. Money from the fund will be distributed to Pennsylvania military families who have suffered a loss of income, or a death or illness of a

family member, which results in financial needs such as food, clothing or medical care. This bill was signed into law as Act 40 of 2005.

### **REVITALIZING OLDER COMMUNITIES**

To prevent the decline of our older communities, we need to make strategic investments in their ongoing development.

That's why I cosponsored Senate Bill 571 and worked for committee approval. The bill provides incentives for the rehabilitation of our historic areas and landmarks by providing *state tax benefits for residential neighborhoods and downtown commercial centers* in older communities. By providing more opportunities for the rehabilitation of our downtowns, we can spark new economic activity and reduce sprawl development. The bill is before the Senate Appropriations Committee.

### **HELPING MUNICIPALITIES COLLECT DELINQUENT TAXES**

It's not fair that most citizens have to pay a little more in taxes to make up for those who don't pay. The budgets of local cities and townships are burdened by revenue lost to tax delinquents. The committee approved legislation that authorizes the state Department of Revenue to collect delinquent Local Real Estate Transfer Tax plus penalty and interest on behalf of the local communities. The measure is now Act 40 of 2005.

## PUC Considering Verizon-MCI Merger

The state Public Utility Commission is considering the proposed merger between Verizon Communication Inc. and MCI Inc.

There are many issues raised by this merger plan. The PUC must consider what effect it will have on the deployment of broadband service, particularly in underserved rural areas. The impact on customer service and jobs must also be examined. Verizon employs 1,200 workers in the Erie area.

Senator Mary Jo White and I arranged for the PUC to hold a hearing on the matter on Sept. 1 at Edinboro University. Telephone and Internet service is important for residential and business customers, and I'll be closely following this issue.

## New Fishing Permit Helps Fund Improvements

The Lake Erie fishing experience is supported through the sale of permits required for anyone who fishes on the Pennsylvania waters of Lake Erie, Presque Isle Bay and their tributaries. In many cases, an angler may need both a Trout-Salmon stamp and a Lake Erie permit, which cost \$8 a piece. Rather than purchasing these individually, a **Combination Trout-Salmon/Lake Erie permit** can now be purchased. At \$14, the combo permit costs \$2 less than two separate permits and is more convenient. (If you hold a lifetime fishing license with a valid Trout-Salmon permit, you only need to buy a Lake Erie permit.)

The state Fish and Boat Commission established an advisory board made up of local citizens to determine the best use of funds raised through Lake Erie fishing permits. The board will provide input into projects along our beautiful lake among them, improving access to fishing spots and providing more parking.

### ECONOMIC IMPACT OF ERIE COUNTY FISHING

Fishing on Lake Erie is not only a tradition enjoyed by generations of anglers, it provides millions of dollars and hundreds of jobs for the local economy.

Visitors come from across Pennsylvania, 23 other states and Canada to fish for perch, walleye, bass and, especially, steelhead. I worked with the Erie Regional Chamber and Growth Partnership, the PA Fish and Boat Commission and other organizations to determine the economic impact of fishing on our region. The study showed that the fishing industry brings in more than \$28 million a year and creates hundreds of jobs in Erie County. And, unlike traditional tourism, fishing draws visitors to Erie County nearly every month – charter boat fishing for Lake Erie perch and walleye in the summer, and steelhead fishing on streams in the colder months.

The 1.1 million steelhead produced and released each year by the hatchery in Fairview play a major role in producing local fishing dollars. The hatchery faced closure if repairs weren't made. Fortunately, repair funds will be made available from part of the \$625 million environmental bond issue approved by voters in April.

### ONE-DAY FISHING LICENSE

With so many visitors from outside the area seeking to bring their tackle boxes – and their tourist dollars – to our region, it's important to make the process as affordable and easy as possible.

The General Assembly recently passed a law creating a new **"One-Day Tourist Fishing License"** that will allow visitors to spend the day on the lake, supporting the local charter boat industry. The new license will help attract visitors and bring in more dollars to support Lake Erie recreational activities.



(From left): Harry Brown, President, EBC Industries; Senator Earll; Michael Chesley, Division Manager, Affinia Brake Parts Inc. of Erie (back row); Dave Tuillio, President/CEO, Custom Engineering Company; Senator Mary Jo White; David Bell, President, Erie Drive Train, Inc.; Sheila Sterrett, Director of Government Affairs, MANP; Don Chrzanowski, Secretary/Treasurer, X-Act Technology, Inc.

## Manufacturing Month

The Senate approved a resolution that I sponsored designating the month of June 2005 as "Manufacturing Month" in Pennsylvania to celebrate the Manufacturers' Association of Northwest Pennsylvania's 100th anniversary.

While the economy has become more diverse in recent decades, manufacturing still accounts for two-thirds of all U.S. exports of goods and services. Manufacturing creates rewarding careers that pay 22 percent more than the national average in nonmanufacturing careers, and its multiplier effect creates eight million additional jobs in other sectors.

## Erie Residents Making Us Proud

It's important to have people from Erie County be a part of state agencies. Living 300 miles from Harrisburg, we need as many voices as possible in all areas of state government.

Erie County is home to many hunters and outdoor lovers, so I was pleased to help win Senate confirmation in June of an Erie resident to serve on the Pennsylvania Game Commission.

**Dan Hill** is an Erie attorney with years of community service, and he is well-qualified to represent our region on the Commission.

It's an important task. For more than 100 years, the Game Commission has managed the Common-

wealth's wildlife resources. It utilizes more than 700 full-time employees and thousands of part-timers and volunteers. Congratulations, Dan Hill!

Two other area residents are making a name for themselves with the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC).

**Dr. Roy Strausbaugh** received the PHMC's 2004 Outstanding Service Award. As a chairman of the history department at Mercyhurst College, Roy was an early enthusiast of the Commonwealth's determination to replace the 1930s replica of the Flagship Niagara with a new vessel that could travel the Great Lakes and beyond. He served as the first president of the Niagara League in

1982 and returned in 2003 to save the organization from bankruptcy.

**Dora "Dolly" Baroni** was named Flagship Niagara League 2004 Volunteer of the Year. Not even Dolly herself knows how long she has volunteered in the Shipwright Gift Shop, but her love of people and eagerness to help has brought well-deserved recognition.

I've been a member of the PHMC board since 2003. I'm honored to represent the Commonwealth's Flagship and proud of the award winners. If you would like more information on PHMC, go to [www.phmc.state.pa.us](http://www.phmc.state.pa.us), and for the latest on the Flagship Niagara visit [www.brignigara.org](http://www.brignigara.org).

## Supporting Pennsylvania's First Responders

Recognizing the major challenges facing Pennsylvania's firefighters and ambulance services, the Senate will be considering recommendations made by a bipartisan commission established last year to study emergency services across the Commonwealth.

The 25-member commission was established under Senate Resolution 60, a measure I co-sponsored.

The commission focused on three main areas: existing systems, existing funding programs, and future innova-



tions. The SR 60 Commission provided us with guidelines by which we can look at those areas of interest and develop legislation that *provides the maximum benefits to Pennsylvania's firefighters and emergency medical service providers.*

The General Assembly is going to look at updating current laws and regulations, study the effectiveness of current funding and look for ways to fund new ini-

tiatives. We're also planning to expand recruitment and retention efforts, as well as enhance what the state offers to first responders. (See story below on Mortgage Assistance Program.) While a strong local commitment is most vital in supporting the brave men and women who protect life and property, the state should do all it can to aid the effort.

### State Police of Crawford and Erie Counties

Legislation has been signed repealing the 133-year-old law authorizing the existence of the State Police of Crawford and Erie Counties.

This all-volunteer law enforcement organization was created in 1872 to deal with horse thieves. It was authorized by state law to carry firearms and make arrests, and to prominently display the words "state police" on shoulder patches and car emblems.

Using the name "state police" was controversial, and the legislation to disband the group was supported by the Pennsylvania State Police, the Pennsylvania State Troopers Association and the state Attorney General's Office.

However, these volunteers have been a *valuable community asset*, and I successfully pushed to delay enactment of the law until after the summer. Hopefully, the group can reorganize and return quickly to continue to provide important services.

### Earll Supports Firefighter Mortgage Assistance Program

Recruiting and training volunteer firefighters and emergency responders is a challenge for many communities. I am co-sponsoring legislation to help communities attract and retain these emergency responders so they can continue to protect our lives and property.

Senate Bill 523 would create the Firefighter Mortgage Assistance Program. This program would *provide low-interest loans to volunteer firefighters, fire police, rescue squad, or emergency medical technicians* to purchase a residence within the

municipality where the applicant volunteers. The program would also provide a \$1,000 grant each year following the purchase of the home for up to five years, as long as the volunteer continues to reside in the home.

Senate Bill 523 would ensure that our Commonwealth's 70,000 volunteer firefighters and emergency responders would be living in close proximity to their stations, an important factor in responding to emergencies quickly. The bill was approved by the Senate Urban Affairs and Housing Committee and awaits a vote in the full Senate.

### Clarifying Surrogate Parenting in PA

There have been some high profile cases recently involving children born as a result of surrogate relationships. Pennsylvania has no laws on this issue.

The legal status of children born under surrogate parenting agreements is currently uncertain. Consequently, when Pennsylvania courts are called upon to enforce these agreements, they must decide issues such as the status of the child without the proper guidance of state law. The General Assembly must act to protect the best interests of children who are born to surrogate parents.

I've introduced Senate Bill 408 to establish rules and guidelines to produce informed and voluntary decision making, and ensure that children born under surrogate parenting agreement have a permanent home.



Senator Earll discusses surrogate parenting legislation at a public hearing of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

## Planning a Trip to Harrisburg?

If you are planning a trip to Harrisburg, call or email my office ahead of time and I can set up a tour of the Capitol. Pennsylvania's Capitol is considered one of the most beautiful in the nation. The State Museum is located right across the street, and a Welcome Center in the Capitol's East Wing provides exhibits and entertainment for all ages. Next year, Pennsylvania will celebrate the Capitol's Centennial Celebration, with a series of events in September and October. It's a great time to come visit our Capitol and learn more about its history, art, and architecture – and to see state government in action. It was a pleasure to welcome the Zbach family of Erie to the Capitol in June.

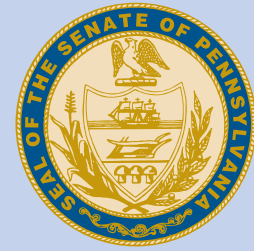


## Protecting Good Faith Employee References

Employers who respond in good faith with reference information on current or former employees would no longer face the threat of lawsuits under a new law.

Act 3 of 2005 would grant legal immunity to employers in such cases. The bill allows employers to give *an honest assessment of a current or former employee*. Employees are protected, however, if the employer provides false or intentionally misleading information.

Pennsylvania is one of 14 states that currently do not provide statutory protection for employers who respond to reference requests. Last year we saw the worst case scenario of what can happen when truthful information cannot be gathered: a nurse pleaded guilty to murdering patients at several facilities in Pennsylvania and New Jersey spanning a 10-year period. The facilities did not share their suspicions about the nurse.



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## Senator Earll's Revamped Web Site Helps You Access State Government

Invite you to check out my newly designed web site at [www.senatorearll.com](http://www.senatorearll.com).

You can find information on state government, download brochures, and access useful links. You can also look up legislation, including my bills (SB 62, SB 158, SB 688, SB 408 and SB 792.)

Please feel free to leave comments. I'd love to hear from you.