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INSIDE THE **SENATE**

A special report from
State Senator Pat Browne

November 2005 • 16th Senatorial District

Dear Friend,

The Senate opened its fall session by acting on several important issues. One measure would crack down on those who would use the Internet as a way to steal others' identities. Another bill addresses price gouging during emergencies, and two other measures help our first responders.

As always, if you have questions about any state issue, call my Allentown District Office at (610) 821-8468, my Northampton County Office at (610) 502-1567, or my Monroe County District Office at (570) 402-1499. Or, visit my website at www.senatorbrowne.com.

Regards,

Pat Browne
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Legislature opens Special Session on Property Tax Relief

The Pennsylvania General Assembly recently opened a special legislative session focusing on property tax relief.

Reducing property taxes continues to be the overriding concern of taxpayers, and for seniors with fixed incomes, it is an absolute necessity. The General Assembly passed legislation last year, Act 72, to provide school districts with an opportunity to cut property taxes and limit

future tax increases. Few districts signed up, so the General Assembly is again working to address taxpayer concerns.

Several proposals have already been introduced. Senate Bill 709 would require school districts to initiate property tax installment payment plans--either quarterly, bimonthly or monthly payments--for residents by the 2006-07 school year. Among the Special Session Senate Bills already

introduced are proposals to freeze property taxes for senior citizens; expand the Property Tax/Rent Rebate Program; replace property taxes by shifting to other taxes; and, give taxpayers greater control over local tax decisions.

I would like to hear your opinion on this issue. Please visit my website www.senatorbrowne.com to participate in an on-line survey.

Senate Approves Grants for Firefighters, EMS Crews

On September 28, the Senate approved Senate Bill 867, a measure that would restore \$25 million in state funding to support volunteer firefighters and ambulance services.

The Pennsylvania Supreme Court recently threw out a provision in the state gaming law that provided \$25 million annually to the Commonwealth's first responders, the largest single source of state funds available to

volunteer fire and ambulance companies. SB 867 restores this annual funding, ensuring that these volunteer organizations would have access to necessary equipment and facilities.

Senate Approves Price Gouging Measure

As we have seen most recently with the hurricanes that devastated the Gulf Coast, major disasters usually bring out the best in people as they try to help their neighbors in need. However, there are always a few unfortunate examples who would rather make a buck at the expense of those whose lives are shattered.

The state Senate approved legislation on September 24 to prevent price gouging in Pennsylvania during and immediately after a declared

state of emergency. Senate Bill 450 is now headed to the House of Representatives for consideration.

The legislation would prohibit “unconscionably excessive” pricing during a declared state of emergency and 30 days after. The measure gives the Attorney General the authority to investigate possible price gouging and imposes penalties on violators.

Under Senate Bill 450, pricing would be considered “unconscionably excessive” if parties within the chain of distribution (manufac-

turers, suppliers, wholesalers, distributors or retailers) increase prices by 20 percent or more over the average price for the same goods or services obtainable in the affected area in the seven days prior to the state of emergency.

The law would not apply to price increases caused by additional expenses -- such as replacement costs, taxes and transportation. Business operators found guilty of price gouging would face a penalty of up to \$10,000 per violation.

Emergency Responders' Death Benefits to Increase

Most people usually forget the dangers that emergency responders face until a tragic incident serves to remind us that their jobs carry inherent risks.

However, it is our responsibility as a community and a Commonwealth to remember and honor those who put their lives on the line to protect others. We certainly cannot express our gratitude for their service, nor fully repay the debt we owe those who die in the line of duty. However, this measure will increase the benefits for their family.

That is why the General Assembly recently approved a measure increasing family death benefits for emergency responders and sent the bill to the Governor for his signature.

The legislation increases family death benefits covered under the Emergency Responders Death Benefits Act from \$50,000 to \$100,000. It also expands the law to cover death benefits for responders who die of a heart attack or stroke that occurs within 24 hours of a physical training exercise or emergency response.

Horse Farms May Join Preservation Program

Pennsylvania's highly successful farmland preservation program, which has saved thousands of acres of green spaces from development, is poised to expand even further.

Under legislation passed by the Senate on September 21, the preservation program would be expanded to include land used for the commercial boarding and training of horses and other commercial equine activity.

House Bill 619 reflects the importance of the equine industry in Pennsylvania, which generates over \$1.12 billion in economic activity annually. Land used for equine activities other than horse breeding does not qualify under the current farmland preservation law.

Commercial equine activity would include horse boarding and training, riding or driving lessons, trail rides and therapeutic riding and driving.

Cracking Down on Cyberspies, ID Theft

Someone may be watching your computer and you may not even know it.

AOL and the National Cyber Security Alliance examined the computers of 329 randomly selected Internet users last October and found that 85 percent were infected with some form of Spyware or Adware. Dell Computer now estimates that one of every five customer support calls are related to Spyware.

Responding to those concerns, the Senate approved Senate Bill 711, legislation that would make it a crime to distribute Spyware to a

computer without the user's consent or knowledge. Spyware is a term for a computer program that gathers information through the user's Internet connection and transmits it to a third party. This information, which includes passwords and personal identification numbers, can be used to commit fraud.

Senate Bill 711 is a major component of a comprehensive package of bi-partisan legislation introduced to protect personal information and prevent identity theft in Pennsylvania. Other bills in the package include measures to protect social security numbers, require disclosure of

computer security breaches and protect credit reports.

Senate Bill 711 is now before the House of Representatives for consideration.

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