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INSIDE THE **SENATE**

A special report from
State Senator Pat Browne

February 2006 • 16th Senatorial District

Dear Friend,

A new year is now here and that means we are in the back stretch of the 2005-06 Legislative Session. In this edition of "Inside the Senate," I'd like to recap the actions of 2005 – which included the Senate passage of a number of important bills.

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
Pat Browne

Helping Taxpayers, Improving Government

Several bills approved by the Senate in 2005 were aimed at helping Pennsylvania's taxpayers and improving the way government does business.

One such bill, House Bill 2082, currently before the House for its concurrence, would limit state government spending and set aside surpluses in a new fund as a way to build up the Rainy Day Fund for use in times of economic necessity and reduce the state Personal Income Tax (PIT).

Unfortunately, a bill we approved to cut the PIT, House Bill 515, was vetoed by the Governor. That measure would have reduced the PIT from the current level of 3.07 percent to

3.05 percent in 2007.

Two other bills would restore the way local governments and school districts collect taxes. A bill now before the House Finance Committee, Senate Bill 709, would require school districts statewide to offer installment payment (quarterly, bimonthly or monthly) plans by the 2006-07 school year.

The Senate also approved legislation to clarify the manner in which municipalities may collect the annual Emergency and Municipal Services tax. Senate Bill 157, now before the House Rules Committee, would require a portion of the tax to be withheld from a taxpayer's paycheck each pay period rather than all at once, and exempt anyone making less than

\$12,000 a year from the tax.

A measure I introduced as a member of the House that allows victims to recover damages resulting from acts of terror received legislative approval at the end of 2005 and was signed into law by Governor Ed Rendell as Act 2 of 2006. My bill, introduced as House Bill 477, lets victims and their families recover general, specific and punitive damages, including damages for emotional distress, fees, costs and any other relief that the court deems necessary and proper.

Legislation that adds a comprehensive list of ethical safeguards to Pennsylvania's gaming

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Combating Identity Theft

A bill approved by the Senate and now before the House Consumer Affairs Committee would protect the privacy of cell phone users. Senate Bill 713 would require cell phone companies with a subscriber directory to have the express consent of the subscriber before including their name and number in the directory.

Also before the House Consumer Affairs Committee is legislation to improve computer security by preventing spyware, a tool used by cyber identity thieves to obtain personal information. Senate Bill 711 would make it a crime to distribute spyware to a computer without the user's consent or knowledge.

Legislation to help Pennsylvanians clear financial issues that arise from identity theft was approved by the Senate in November. Senate Bill 178, now before the House Judiciary Committee, would require the Office of Victim's Services to cooperate with other agencies assist victims of identity with the resolution of any financial issues arising from the commission of the crime.

Another bill approved by the Senate, Senate Bill 601, would prohibit anyone from making a Social Security number available to the public and ban the use of Social Security numbers to access goods or services. This bill, now before the House Intergovernmental Affairs Committee, would also prohibit the transmission of Social Security numbers over the Internet unless the connection is secure or the information is encrypted.

Helping Taxpayers, Improving Government cont...

law was approved by the Senate in November. Senate Bill 862, now before the House, would prohibit any public official, executive-level public employee or party official, or the spouse or minor of the official, from holding a financial interest in a licensed entity during their tenure and for one year thereafter.

We also voted to restore the landmark "Fair Share Act" lawsuit reform. Senate Bill 435 brings Pennsylvania in line with lawsuit reform passed in 44 other states by eliminating "joint and severability" and holding defendants responsible for their proportionate share in

cases where they are found to be less than 60 percent responsible. The bill is now before the House State Government Committee.

The Senate approved landmark legislation in reaction to a U.S. Supreme Court decision that governments can seize an individual's property merely to turn it over to another private interest. Under Senate Bill 881, now moving in the House, the use of eminent domain would be prohibited for private economic development and the definition of "blight" would be tightened.

Helping Pennsylvanians in the Fight Against Terrorism

Last November the Senate approved, and the Governor signed in January, a bill I introduced which allows victims to recover damages resulting from acts of terror. This law, Act 2 of 2006, lets victims and their families recover general, specific and punitive damages, including damages for emotional distress, fees, costs and any other relief that the court deems necessary and proper.

Act 83 of 2005 now requires insurance companies to allow families to let the medical insurance coverage lapse while a full-time student is on active duty military service and have it start back up when the student returns to school, with an extension in coverage equal to that of the term of duty.

Act 59 of 2005 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. The act covers firefighters, ambulance service and rescue squad members, National Guard members and police.

In September, the Senate passed Senate Bill 867, legislation that would restore \$25 million in state funding to support volunteer firefighters and ambulance services for the construction or renovation of facilities, for the purchase or repair of equipment, for training personnel, or for debts associated with capital projects. The bill is now before the House Appropriations Committee.

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