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YOUR REPORT

from State Representative

ROBERT FREEMAN

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Road Safety and Improvement are Goals of Transportation Initiatives in 136th District

With suburban sprawl development engulfing the Lehigh Valley and creating numerous transportation problems, increased concern is being raised throughout the region with regard to traffic safety issues and the upgrading of currently inadequate or dangerous roads. Rep. Bob Freeman has been working with local officials and citizen groups throughout the 136th District to improve these increasingly unsafe roads.

Hellertown – Pedestrian safety along Main Street (Route 412) in Hellertown has been an ongoing concern in the last few years as the number of fatalities and other serious accidents involving pedestrians trying to cross Main Street has increased. Increased traffic along Main Street has resulted from ongoing development occurring in surrounding areas. At certain times of the day, it becomes difficult to cross the street due to the increased volume and speed of vehicles.

After being approached by a number of concerned citizens regarding Main Street, including Lee Weidner, who writes a column for *The Valley Voice*, Rep. Freeman convened a meeting of PennDOT and borough officials in February of last year. The meeting was extremely productive. After reviewing safety concerns and discussing numerous options, it was agreed that PennDOT would conduct an informal safety audit of the entire stretch of Main Street to give the borough a better handle on what measures would have the best results.

The audit made numerous recommendations that the borough has been implementing, including the removal of unnecessary signage that distracts drivers from important safety signs. Rep. Freeman secured grant money to install a number of pedestrian crossing signs at key intersections that are due to be installed in the next few months. Additionally, Rep. Freeman is currently working to obtain funding to improve the safety of the critical Main and Water streets intersection in the borough. That grant will go a long way toward improving pedestrian crossing at this busiest of Main Street intersections. While grant money is being secured, Police Chief Robert Balum continues to pursue law enforcement measures while the borough and involved citizens continue to look at various traffic calming steps that can be implemented to make Main Street safer.

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Easton's West Ward Revitalization Is Focus of Elm Street and Neighborhood Partnership Programs

In February 2004, Gov. Ed Rendell came to Easton to sign Rep. Freeman's Elm Street legislation into law. The Elm Street Program created by Rep. Freeman's legislation provides funding and technical assistance to assist communities in the revitalization of their older urban residential neighborhoods. Any older urban neighborhood is eligible to participate in the program provided it is in need of revitalization and is in close proximity to a downtown commercial district. Under the program, which is administered by the Department of Community and Economic Development, funding is provided for planning grants, an Elm Street Manager to coordinate neighborhood organizing and plan implementation, and residential reinvestment grants that can be used for such infrastructure improvements as building facade work, sidewalk and street repairs, tree plantings, and street lighting.

Easton's West Ward neighborhood has been targeted for Elm Street assistance. "The West Ward is the kind of neighborhood I had in mind when I came up with the concept of an Elm Street Program," Rep. Freeman noted.

Thanks to the efforts of Alan Jennings, executive director of the Community Action Committee of the Lehigh Valley, two corporate sponsors have been brought in to the West Ward revitalization effort. Both Easton Hospital and Lafayette-Ambassador Bank have committed \$1 million each over a 10-year period to help the West Ward. In return for their generosity, the bank and hospital will receive tax credits under the state's Neighborhood Partnership Program.

"Between the corporate contributions and the funding and assistance available through the Elm Street Program, the West Ward will finally have the resources it needs to turn things around and ensure the success of our revitalization effort," Rep. Freeman said.

The Elm Street and Neighborhood Partnership programs are being combined into a West Ward Neighborhood Partnership-Easton's Elm Street Program with West Ward resident Gary Bertsch selected to serve as the Elm Street-NPP manager for the project. The West Ward Weed & Seed Program has also become an integral part of the revitalization effort.

The West Ward has received a planning grant under the Elm Street Program that, along with the contributions from Lafayette-Ambassador Bank and Easton Hospital, has funded a comprehensive plan for the West Ward's revival. The plan was developed by the Urban Research & Development Corp., which conducted numerous public forums and resident and business surveys in collaboration with Elm Street-NPP Steering Committee members. The information gathered highlighted what improvements West Ward residents see as the most critical to be accomplished. The comprehensive plan will serve as a blueprint for the West Ward revitalization effort.

The West Ward Neighborhood Partnership's first-year budget has focused on providing funding for a Porch, Paint and Repair program; art in public places, including murals at Centennial Park, Cottingham Stadium and Saint Anthony's Playground wall; a business signage program; a "Walkable Neighborhood" sidewalk replacement program; and an inventory of street trees in the neighborhood with plans for the removal of dead trees and stumps and the planting of new trees. In addition, a three-phase Housing Opportunities Awareness Program is being planned to assist West Ward residents with their efforts to own a home. The program will also provide training to landlords to help ensure that they rent to responsible tenants in the neighborhood. A \$250,000 PennDOT Hometown Streets-Safe Routes to Schools grant has been applied for to provide streetscape improvements to the

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Personal Notes...

From Rep. Freeman

The Saga of the Pay Raise Fiasco

Last July, the legislature passed a pay raise bill that ignited the equivalent of a prairie fire across Pennsylvania. Although the legislation also boosted the pay of judges and members of the executive branch, it was the size and nature of the legislative raises, ranging from 16 percent to 54 percent, that truly enraged the electorate. **I voted against the pay raise.** To me the raise was too much at a time when families are struggling to make ends meet, gas prices continue to rise and the cost of heating a home has gone through the ceiling. I also opposed the pay raise because of the unvouchered expenses provision that allowed legislators to collect the raise before the start of a new term in office. Although in the past, the courts have ruled unvouchered expenses legal, to me it was a blatant violation of Article II, Section 8 of our state constitution, which states that "no member of either House shall during the term to which he may be elected, receive any increase of salary, or mileage, under any law passed during such term." That's as clear as it gets constitutionally.

The leadership tried to pressure me to support the raise but I told them that I would not violate my oath of office by supporting a proposal that so clearly violated the constitution. Even after it passed, I refused to accept the unvouchered expenses because of my belief that they are unconstitutional. For my opposition to the pay raise, the leadership punished me by removing me from a subcommittee chairmanship that I held. A half a dozen of my colleagues who

had opposed the pay raise were also removed from their subcommittee chairmanships. Despite the punishment I received, I was steadfast in my opposition to the pay raise. I and a handful of my fellow House members co-sponsored legislation to repeal the raise, earning another black mark against me by the leadership. However, the leadership had not gauged the depth of resentment on the part of the public. Newspaper columns and editorials continued to rail against the pay raise, and an unprecedented grassroots movement rose up to demand its repeal. When a state Supreme Court judge lost his retention election over the issue, the leadership finally acknowledged the wake-up call and permitted our repeal bill to run. It passed overwhelmingly in both Houses of the legislature and was quickly signed into law by the governor.

Although a Pennsylvania judge has brought suit against the repeal, I hope the court will heed the will of the people and rule against the lawsuit. In drafting the repeal legislation, care was taken to ensure that the language of the bill would meet the constitutional test required for repealing a pay raise of "all salaried officers of the Commonwealth." I am confident that the language meets that test.

Although I took heat from the leadership for my staunch opposition to the pay raise, I feel vindicated by the groundswell of public opposition to it and the ultimate repeal of the raise. The fiasco of the pay raise has also unleashed a strong desire for reform of how business is done in Harrisburg. That is something I have long

advocated and that is long overdue. We have a real opportunity to reform the operation of the legislature and empower the rank-and-file members who have for too long been relegated to a subordinate role by overly powerful legislative leaders. There is even talk of calling a state constitutional convention to see if a more comprehensive overhaul of our state government can be achieved.

To my mind, there are a number of fundamental reforms that need to be put in place. House rules need to be rewritten to give rank-and-file members a greater say in the process. A lobbyist disclosure bill needs to be enacted to give the public a more transparent way of assessing the influence of special interest groups on the legislative process. In line with that, we also need campaign finance reform to reduce the influence of special interest groups on elections and ultimately upon the legislative process. Finally, we need to change the reapportionment process in Pennsylvania so that legislative districts are drawn to reflect communities of interest rather than create tortuously designed districts guaranteed to ensure incumbent protection.

None of these reforms will be easy to put in place. However, for the first time in a long time, there seems to be a strong will on the part of reform advocates both in and outside of the legislature to make it happen. I am confident that, finally, real reform will come to Pennsylvania in the very near future. You can count on me to be in the forefront of that effort.

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600 block of Northampton Street, one of the blocks identified as a priority by the comprehensive plan.

In addition to the programs already underway, the partnership will continue to focus on housing issues, neighborhood physical improvements, commercial reuse and development, recreation and open space, and community and social service needs, with a particular focus on public safety concerns.

"I'm very pleased with the progress that is being made in the West Ward through the efforts of the West Ward Neighborhood Partnership-Easton's Elm Street Program," Freeman said. "The commitment of many dedicated individuals to this revitalization effort, and the combined resources of the bank, hospital, Weed & Seed, and the state Elm Street Program, affords us the best opportunity in a long time to stabilize and improve the West Ward. The concept of my Elm Street Program was inspired by my years of growing up in the West Ward. It was a great neighborhood to grow up in. With the improvements envisioned by the West Ward Neighborhood Partnership-Easton's Elm Street Program, it can still be a great place to live, work and raise a family."

Freeman Bill to Allow Some Housing Authorities to Create Own Police Force Moves out of Committee

Legislation introduced by Rep. Freeman that would allow housing authorities in cities of the third-class like Easton, Allentown and Bethlehem to create their own police forces was unanimously reported out of the House Urban Affairs Committee recently and now moves to the full House for consideration. Under current law, only housing authorities in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh can create their own police force.

"Many other city housing authorities are facing the same problems as Pittsburgh's and Philadelphia's. Currently, Easton's housing authority relies on the services of the city police. Local police resources are already overextended," Rep. Freeman said. "By allowing public housing authorities to have their own police force, we could provide a ready presence to focus on public safety and crime-prevention efforts in these housing projects, and city police would be freed up to address other public safety concerns in the community at large. The end result would be added police personnel in the community to combat crime."

Under Rep. Freeman's legislation (H.B. 1877), housing authority police officers would be required to undergo the same training and meet the same standards as municipal police officers.

The idea for Rep. Freeman's legislation was recommended by Larry Hendershot, a former Wilson police officer who serves on the Easton Housing Authority Board. Rep. Freeman is hopeful his bill will come up for a vote before the full House sometime during the spring legislative session.



Rep. Freeman discusses upcoming legislation on the voting calendar with Rep. Greg Vitali (D-Delaware County) on the House floor.



Growing Greener Provides the Resources Needed to Protect and Promote Pennsylvania's Environment

Last July, Rep. Freeman voted for legislation that implemented the \$625 million environmental bond issue, known as Growing Greener II, which Pennsylvania voters overwhelmingly approved earlier in the year. The law uses the \$625 million to fund an array of important environmental programs designed to preserve open space and farmland, clean up serious environmental pollution, and enhance the quality of life in Pennsylvania.

Rep. Freeman strongly supports Growing Greener II.

"This landmark proposal will go a long way toward addressing Pennsylvania's environmental needs," Rep. Freeman said. "It is essential if we are to hold on to our beautiful natural heritage and guarantee our environmental integrity here in Pennsylvania for current and future generations."

Growing Greener II provides funding to protect water supplies, conserve open space, clean up old industrial sites, address acid mine

drainage abatement issues, preserve farmland and historic properties, revitalize older communities, and provide resources to counties to address local environmental concerns.

The Department of Environmental Protection received \$230 million of the funding, which will be used for watershed and flood protection, acid mine drainage abatement efforts, the closing of abandoned oil and gas wells, and reclaiming industrial brownfields for reuse. The Department of Conservation and Natural Resources received \$217.5 million to be used to improve existing state parks and state forests, conserve open space, and assist in acquiring land for county parks. Additional funding is allocated for community park and recreation programs. The Department of Agriculture gets \$80 million from the bond issue to supplement its existing funding for county-based farmland preservation programs, and the Department of Community and Economic Development has been allocated \$50 million to enhance a number of programs designed to revitalize older communities and assist in the redevelopment of downtowns and

older residential neighborhoods. The Fish and Boat Commission and the Game Commission received \$27.5 million and \$20 million, respectively, to aid in conservation and wildlife management efforts, which enhance Pennsylvania's natural and recreational potential.

Of the county allocations, Northampton County will receive \$1.75 million over six years or \$292,000 every year. These funds are designed to give the county flexibility in addressing local environmental needs and programming, and can be used for a variety of county environmental initiatives.

When the \$625 million of Growing Greener II is added to the funds originally allocated for environmental programs under the first Growing Greener program, Pennsylvania will have invested more than \$1.25 billion in environmental programming.

"With these resources, Pennsylvania will be able to secure a fine quality of life for its citizens and guarantee a promising environmental legacy," Rep. Freeman noted.

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Steel City, Lower Saucon – Riverside Drive, better known as the "Narrows," has been a key concern of the residents of Steel City since it was closed due to the damage it sustained from Hurricane Ivan in September 2004. As a result of the damage, PennDOT was forced to temporarily close the road. After many months of seeing no action to reopen Riverside Drive, concerned citizens led by Pricilla deLeon, who is a member of Lower Saucon Council, met to express their concerns regarding the road. Without the "Narrows" being reopened, the citizens of Steel City would have only one means of getting in and out of their village. If that access was blocked residents would be trapped.

Following the initial meeting of citizens, a meeting was convened with Rep. Freeman, township officials, and other state and federal officials and their staff. It had been learned that PennDOT was looking at permanently closing the road. Knowing that this would be unacceptable to the residents of Steel City and the Steel City Volunteer Fire Co., which uses the "Narrows" to respond to emergency calls from area residents, Rep. Freeman set up a meeting among local, state and federal officials and PennDOT. Out of that meeting came a firm commitment from PennDOT to reopen Riverside Drive. While finding the millions in funding necessary to fix and improve the road continues to be a daunting task, PennDOT has begun the cleanup of debris along the "Narrows" and is using innovative and cost-saving measures to shore up the retaining wall that keeps the road from falling into the railroad tracks below.

PennDOT has been very cooperative over the last few months in working toward the road's reopening. "I really have to credit District Engineer Amar Bhajandas for his commitment to getting the job done and looking at ways to se-

cure the resources necessary to move the project forward," Rep. Freeman said.

Freemansburg – The eastern end of Main Street in Freemansburg has been an ongoing problem for many years. This section of the road features a precarious curve that turns under an abandoned railroad overpass, and has been the scene of numerous serious accidents over the years. It also is prone to recurring flooding, making the road impassable after heavy rains. It has been a longtime goal of Freemansburg Mayor Gerald Yob and other borough officials to realign the road along a higher elevation to the north that would remove the dangerous curve and avoid future flooding.

Unfortunately, at about \$1 million, the price tag for the project has been prohibitive. Rep. Freeman secured authorization for the project in the state's Highway Capital Budget, but resources for such projects are stretched thin throughout the Commonwealth. In response to Mayor Yob's desire to see the project move forward, Rep. Freeman secured a meeting among PennDOT and borough officials, as well as a key representative from the Governor's Office last year. This meeting enabled officials from Freemansburg to make their case on the importance of the Main Street project.

As progress was continuing on securing state funding, good news arrived in the form of an \$800,000 allocation in federal highway funding secured by Congressman Charlie Dent. With the federal dollars in hand, Rep. Freeman was able to secure a commitment from the Governor's Office of \$125,000 in state money to provide the remaining funding necessary to begin work on the project.

Bethlehem Township – A tragic accident occurred along Freemansburg Avenue in Bethlehem Township last year. Fourteen-year-old Elizabeth "Lizzy" Shine was killed by a vehicle as she was coming home from school. Traffic along the transportation corridor has been increasing in both volume and speed ever since the completion of the Route 33 extension and the Southmont Mall. In response to the tragedy of Lizzy's death, her parents and numerous concerned local residents led by Doris Correll organized the Freemansburg Avenue Safety Team (FAST) to draw attention to the need to improve safety conditions along Freemansburg Avenue between 8th and 11th Streets. Mrs. Correll contacted Reps. Bob Freeman, Steve Samuelson and Craig Dally, all of whom represent portions of Bethlehem Township in the state legislature. A meeting was recently convened with the three state representatives, staffers from state Sen. Lisa Boscola's office, township and PennDOT officials, and the members of FAST. Meeting in the parking lot of Young's Pharmacy on Freemansburg Avenue, Doris Correll outlined the safety concerns of area residents. A good discussion followed between residents and representatives from PennDOT.

Rep. Freeman recommended the kind of informal safety audit conducted by PennDOT for Hellertown that had been so helpful in addressing safety concerns along Route 412. It was agreed that a citizens' safety advisory committee would be formed to work with PennDOT and township officials on strategies to make Freemansburg Avenue safer. It is hoped that with PennDOT, the township and the new citizens' advisory committee working together, steps will be taken to put in place traffic calming measures and improve the overall safety of Freemansburg Avenue.



YOUR REPORT
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Rep. Freeman's Measure Would Include Third-Class Counties in Watershed Storm Water Management Plans

Rep. Freeman added an amendment to legislation that would allow Lehigh Valley counties to develop watershed-wide comprehensive plans to manage storm water.

The measure (H.B. 88), which passed the House with Freeman's amendment, would enable municipalities in certain counties to work together to develop and implement uniform storm water management practices within watersheds. Rep. Freeman's amendment would include third-class counties, such as Lehigh and Northampton, in the legislation.

"Under current law, all storm water planning is governed by Act 167 of 1978, which requires each county to develop a storm water plan for all new development," Rep. Freeman said. "However, Act 167 does not address storm water run-off prob-

lems in as comprehensive a way as it should."

Municipalities are currently required to implement storm water plans when considering new development projects. Act 167 does not provide legal authority to address pre-existing storm water issues or cumulative storm water runoff problems.

"Areas in the Lehigh Valley have been challenged to deal with the aftereffects of flooding and runoff from hurricanes and other severe weather we've endured. It's important that storm water planning be done in a more comprehensive way to address the severe flooding we have witnessed over the past years," Rep. Freeman stated.

The bill is currently pending in the Senate for consideration.

Freeman Bill to Assist Communities in Dealing with Sprawl

Rep. Freeman has introduced legislation that would allow municipalities to impose a temporary moratorium on development while they rewrite their land-use ordinances.

Rep. Freeman's measure (H.B. 1587) would give municipalities the authority to place a temporary moratorium on development within their boundaries for a maximum of one year while they are in the process of rewriting their land-use ordinances to better cope with development. Land-use ordinances could include a comprehensive plan, zoning ordinance, or subdivision and land development ordinance.

"Municipalities are often overwhelmed by rapid development and find they don't have adequate time to rewrite their local land-use ordinances to deal with it properly," Rep. Freeman said. "The purpose of my bill is to ensure that municipalities get the breathing space they need to put in place more effective land use ordinances to deal with growth in their communities."

The bill is in the House Local Government Committee for consideration.

Freeman Pushes Changes to Emergency and Municipal Services tax to Ease Burden on Workers

In December, the House of Representatives passed a Senate bill that would give Pennsylvania workers a break by requiring municipalities to collect the new \$52 Emergency and Municipal Services Tax in installments throughout the year, rather than the current lump sum deduction and to exempt from the tax any worker who earns less than \$12,000 a year. Rep. Freeman introduced a similar bill (H.B.237) in the House early last year.

The Senate bill, which the House altered slightly, is back in the House for another vote.

"We are still negotiating with the Senate on this bill," Rep. Freeman said. "Many people live paycheck to paycheck, and taking \$52 out of a paycheck all at one time is a big bite out of a family budget, especially if someone is earning only the minimum wage or slightly more."

Rep. Freeman believes by requiring employers to deduct this tax in smaller increments, his legislation would ensure that employees are not unduly burdened by the tax. "If the EMS tax was taken out at only one dollar a week, it would be easier on all workers," Freeman noted.

World War II Veterans Can Receive Recognition for Service

Last year marked the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II. Millions of Americans served in the armed forces during WWII and more than 400,000 lost their lives in that war. Recognizing the veterans who served during World War II and who live in our communities is an appropriate tribute to their service to our country. Rep. Freeman is providing certificates of appreciation through his office to all residents of the 136th Legislative District who served in the armed forces of the United States of America from 1941 to 1945.

If you are a veteran of World War II and would like to be recognized for your service, or if you know someone who you would like to see recognized, contact Rep. Freeman's office at 610-253-5543.

Rep. Freeman Scores High Environmental Mark

Rep. Freeman has been lauded by the Pennsylvania League of Conservation Voters for his 100 percent voting record on environmental bills in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives. The league's ratings were issued last summer.

"I am pleased to be recognized for my environmental voting record," Rep. Freeman said. "Among my top priorities as a lawmaker are preserving farmland and protecting our environment."