



Capitol

SUMMER 2011

# UPDATE

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Serving the 132nd Legislative District

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## State Budget: A missed opportunity to do more for Allentown

As you may already know, the 2011-2012 Pennsylvania State Budget has been passed and signed into law. I was a firm “NO” vote on the budget because it simply didn’t invest enough money into helping Allentown’s taxpayers, working families, students and those most in need.

We can all agree that government needs to live within its means and some cuts were understandable and warranted. In my opinion the cuts in this budget were irresponsible and far too drastic – especially when the state has a more than \$700 million revenue surplus and revenue projections for next year are nearly \$1 billion higher!

I believe in good schools – without good schools there can be no job creation, because employers count on a well-educated, well-trained workforce. This budget cut schools at every level, especially here in Allentown where 112 teachers are being let go and property taxes will be increased by an average of \$93 per household to make up for the more than 10 percent cut in state funding – a decrease of nearly \$11 million from last year!

This budget also cut funding for higher education, including Lehigh-Carbon Community College, Penn State and State System of Higher Education schools like Kutztown University. No matter where a student attends school this budget hurts – reducing tuition assistance and student loans through the PA Higher Education Assistance Agency. The result: higher tuition, fewer student loan dollars and a dimmer future for working-class students looking to get their piece of the American Dream.

Former Governor Bob Casey, Sr. used to ask “What did you do when you had the power?” – meaning what did you do for those who depended on you? Despite my efforts this budget makes harsh cuts to social services – programs that help pay for care for senior citizens in long-term care homes, programs to help disabled children, and the safety net that’s there to help people in need. Lastly, it actually raises taxes on our hospitals while cutting funding for health care for working Pennsylvanians and reducing health care options for poorer seniors. I simply couldn’t support such a plan.

The fight is far from over. I’ve heard from hundreds of you about the need to restore funding to these programs, and I’ll keep working to direct funding back to our schools and programs to help those who need it the most.

**GET YOUR VOICE HEARD!** I’ll be hosting a public hearing next month about the impact of budget cuts. I’ll be sure to let you know when and where the hearing will take place in Allentown.

### Property Tax/Rent Rebate deadline EXTENDED until Dec. 31

Senior citizens in Allentown now have extra time to apply for the program that can put hundreds of dollars back into their pockets to offset property taxes or rent.

#### The Property Tax/Rent Rebate program is open to:

- eligible seniors age 65 and older;
- widows and widowers 50 and older and;
- people with permanent disabilities 18 and older.

To qualify applicants must earn less than \$35,000 per year (for homeowners) or \$15,000 per year (for renters) – and only HALF of Social Security or railroad retirement benefits count toward eligibility!

If you’re eligible – or you know someone who might be – my office can help you fill out an application. Just stop by 2030 West Tilghman St. in Allentown or get the form online at [www.revenue.state.pa.us](http://www.revenue.state.pa.us).

### What can my office do for you?

Just a reminder that my office has moved! We’re now located in Suite 100 at 2030 West Tilghman Street in the city. Office hours are still 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday, and we can still help you with virtually any issue involving state government – and even point you in the right direction for local and federal government issues.

# Ban on so-called “fake drugs” signed into Law

It's called “K2” or “Spice” but it's better known as Synthetic Marijuana and it's made by spraying harsh chemicals on plant material.

It's called “Bath Salts” but it's better known as Synthetic Cocaine, with an effect that even drug addicts call more intense than the real thing.

No matter what you call this garbage it's really poison being marketed to our young people, and, until now, there was nothing stopping your kids from buying it.

Until now. I'm VERY proud to announce that the legislature has passed a comprehensive ban on so-called “fake drugs,” Governor Corbett signed the ban into law, and as of August 23 the possession and sale of synthetic marijuana, synthetic cocaine (bath salts) and salvia will be punishable by the same penalties as the possession and sale of the “real” versions of those drugs.

I was sick and tired of not being able to open the newspaper or watch the local news these days without seeing a story about these so-called “fake drugs” destroying lives and families, putting innocent lives at risk, and overwhelming our hospital emergency rooms.

Too many young people believe this poison is safe just

because it was legal, but synthetic drugs are no more a safe alternative to real drugs than paint thinner is a safe alternative to alcohol, and there were no laws preventing their sale. To make matters worse some of the producers of these poisons put fruit flavors in the product for a sweet taste to better appeal to younger buyers.

A 17-year-old high school student couldn't walk into a convenience store and buy tobacco or walk into a liquor store and buy alcohol – but that same 17-year-old could walk into a smoke shop or go online and buy synthetic marijuana or bath salts with no questions asked and no repercussion to the seller if that student gets caught, or worse, ends up in the hospital or in the morgue. After August 23; that's NOT going to happen.

This isn't a Republican issue or a Democratic issue; it's a public health and safety issue. I was proud to work with lawmakers of both parties from the House and the Senate to get this ban passed.

*Scan this code with your smartphone to watch me on Comcast Newsmakers discussing the impact of synthetic drugs on our community.*



I'm joined by my colleague Rep. Jerry Stern, R-Blair County, at Dieruff High School to speak to teacher Erika Smith's students about the dangers of synthetic drugs and the legislation we co-sponsored to ban those drugs.



I was proud to stand with Pa. State Police troopers and my House & Senate colleagues as Gov. Corbett signs the ban on so-called “fake” drugs into law on June 23, 2011.

## PHEAA to add \$50 million to college loan & grant fund

### Extend deadline to apply for aid to attend community colleges

As a Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency Board Member, I'm proud to announce PHEAA will transfer \$50 million from the agency to the Commonwealth to make more college loans and grants available to more students, and extend the deadline to apply for financial aid to attend in-state community colleges from May 1 to Aug. 1.

The agency's smart business practices have made it possible to create this windfall and put it to work

helping students get the education they need and deserve to compete in the modern job market. This is a challenging time for students and their families, and this funding will go a long way to help without forcing the taxpayer to spend one dime.

Extending the deadline for applying for financial aid to attend community colleges will help displaced workers get training for new careers.

Community colleges like Lehigh-Carbon Community College in the

Lehigh Valley do an incredible job preparing people for careers that are rewarding both personally and financially, and in a changing economy those colleges work with employers to make sure students get key training in a real-world environment. By extending the student aid application period we'll make sure that 15,000 more people who want to attend community college can afford to do so.

# Helping needy Allentown students with personal hygiene products

Last year, the Allentown School District Homeless Liaison distributed personal hygiene products to more than 600 disadvantaged ASD students. The very difficult economy has created a higher demand for this program and as such, my office is partnering with the ASD Homeless Liaison and we need your help.

Think back to your school days and think about how much harder those days would have been if you had to attend

school without even the chance to wash your hair, brush your teeth or use deodorant.

We are accepting donations of combs and brushes, toothbrushes and toothpaste of any kind, shampoo, men's and women's deodorant and of course bar soap.

No donation is too small, and you can drop it off at my office at 2030 West Tilghman Street. Working together, we can help make school a better place for students in need.

## Slot gaming helps deliver more than \$11 million in property tax reduction

Pennsylvania's slot gaming industry has created tens of thousands of jobs, brought in tourism dollars and, most importantly, is helping to reduce property taxes across the state.

This year more than \$600 million has been earmarked for property tax reduction statewide, and more than \$11 million right here at home.

The Parkland School District will get \$1,737,104, cutting property taxes by an average of \$105 per household. The Allentown School District will get \$9,627,500, cutting property taxes by an average of \$527 per household – that's the highest per-household cut in the entire state!

If you've already applied for your Homestead Exemption, you don't need to do anything – your cut will be automatically included in your bill. If you've just moved to Allentown or haven't applied for the extension yet, please contact my office and we'll help you save money.



**A real-world lesson in how government works! I met with students from Cleveland Elementary who came to the Capitol on June 7 to advocate for House Bill 1398, a bill that would allow hedgehogs to be kept by classrooms and as pets in Pennsylvania.**

## Official State ID Card available

If you don't drive but still need photo ID and don't want to spend the money to keep your Pennsylvania Driver's License current, my office can help get a legal photo ID for any resident over the age of 10 that is suitable for all situations where identification is required. Contact my office or visit PennDOT online at [www.dmv.state.pa.us](http://www.dmv.state.pa.us) to find out more.



**Trexler Middle School students demonstrate their high-tech project during the PAECT Capitol Student Technology Showcase on May 23.**



**I was proud to present House Resolution 200 to Bayada Nurses to honor their 35 years of providing vital in-home care services at a Capitol rally in April.**

## Unclaimed money may be available to Allentown Veterans

The federal government could have money that belongs to you or a family member. Money from unclaimed life insurance policies, dividend checks or premium refunds that belongs to policy holders could be being held by the Department of Veterans' Affairs. Visit the DVA online at <http://insurance.va.gov> or call 1-800-669-8477 for more information.



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## INSIDE:

State Budget delivers heavy blow

Synthetic Marijuana and Synthetic Cocaine BANNED

Slot gaming helps deliver millions in property tax reduction

PHEAA to add \$50 million to college loan & grant fund

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## Arena Project to reinvent Downtown Allentown

For the last four years, I worked with other elected officials, community leaders, financial experts and economic development professionals to explore the idea of building a multi-use arena and bringing a top-notch AHL Hockey team – the top affiliate of the Philadelphia Flyers -- to Allentown. Now, we are closer than ever to having this project come to fruition.

To help pay for the arena I supported a plan that created a special tax zone in the city – tax revenue generated in this zone STAYS in this zone to support the arena and improvements to the city's infrastructure. There has been much debate of the location of the arena, but ultimately, economics chose the site for us. By law, the arena MUST be located in this special tax zone. This fact prevents us from situating it near Coca Cola Park or along Mack Boulevard on the South Side, as we considered.

We also looked at the area around the Lehigh River. However the costs associated with land acquisition, flooding and other environmental concerns and infrastructure development made situating the arena along the waterfront cost prohibitive, to say nothing of the hundreds of good-paying industrial jobs that

would be lost if the riverfront site had been chosen.

The multi-million dollar proposed arena will completely reinvent our city – creating jobs, spurring economic development and improving recreational options for people all across the region who want to see world-class entertainers and support professional sports right here at home. Plus it will bring up to 10,000 people per event downtown after 5 p.m. who are looking to eat, shop and enjoy themselves in our city.

It is important to note that the owners of the Phantoms were always committed to the Lehigh Valley. They chose Allentown because, like us, they believe in the incredible potential of our city and the unmatched dedication of our residents. Their commitment and faith in us is the surest sign that Allentown's better days are ahead.



Artists' conception of the proposed arena