



# YOUR REPORT

*from State Representative*

# ROBERT FREEMAN



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## Freeman's Appalachian Trail protection measure signed into law by governor

Legislation introduced by Rep. Freeman that will ensure Pennsylvania's portion of the Appalachian Trail is protected from inappropriate forms of development was signed into law in June by Gov. Ed Rendell.

House Bill 1281 will require municipalities that contain portions of the Appalachian Trail to adopt, implement and enforce zoning ordinances as part of their responsibility to protect the trail.



Freeman's bill strengthens a 1978 law that was intended to protect the trail as a state scenic, historic and aesthetic treasure. The original law did not mandate the zoning required in Freeman's bill, which is critical to protecting the trail from inappropriate development.

"The trail is one of our state's greatest natural assets," Freeman said. "My legislation will go a long way to protecting the pristine setting of the trail for current and future generations."

Freeman said the legislation was suggested by Easton environmental attorney Charles Elliot as a response to a situation in Monroe County where a developer purchased land near the Appalachian Trail with the intent of constructing a private automobile racing club. Since the township where this development was proposed had no zoning in place at the time, there was little that could be done to block the inappropriate use.

"I'm very pleased that the governor has signed my bill into law," Freeman said. "We can now be assured that inappropriate development will not mar the trail."

## An energy independence strategy that helps families go green

*Other measures taken to help reduce dependence on foreign oil, enhance conservation*

Pennsylvania's Energy Independence Strategy is a series of bills signed into law that would attract more of the world's leading clean energy companies, reduce our dependence on foreign oil, grow green jobs and help with conservation.

The Energy Independence Fund – the funding mechanism for the plan – will pump \$650 million into the Pennsylvania economy through a variety of measures that will create jobs, develop alternative energy and ensure a cleaner environment today and for future generations.

- \$165 million for alternative energy manufacturing projects will create high-tech, high-wage jobs
- \$80 million for solar energy projects, reducing the demand on power plants
- \$100 million to defray the high, up-front cost for homeowners and small businesses to install solar panels

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## Personal Notes...

By Rep. Bob Freeman

### The Road to Reform Part II

Efforts to reform the political process in Harrisburg had gotten off to a good start when the new legislative session first convened in January 2007. Voter reaction to the pay raise of 2005 had produced the largest class of freshmen legislators in years, all committed to reform. As someone who opposed the legislative pay raise, refused to accept the money, and co-sponsored the legislation that eventually repealed the raise, I was pleased by the addition of so many new reformers to the legislature. I have been an advocate for reforming the way that business is done in Harrisburg for many years. I fought to reform House rules back in the early 1990s to make the legislative process more open and deliberative. While we achieved modest gains, more extensive reforms eluded us at that time.

The 2005 pay raise changed all of that and 2007 ushered in a new wave of reform. I wound up serving on the Speaker's Legislative Reform Commission that made extensive recommendations on how to reform the legislature. We revamped the House rules to eliminate middle of the night votes and slowed down the legislative process to ensure that House members and the public had sufficient time to evaluate proposals coming up for votes before the House. We also ended the practice of "ghost voting" by members on Capital Leave and did away with car leases for members so that they had to use either state fleet leased vehicles or drive their own cars, as I have

done throughout my legislative service. The new rules also required that more information regarding House operations be made public and placed on the Web. Information on legislation, committee business, and House payroll all became accessible to the public.

The reform of House rules was followed by the passage of a new Open Records Law, which makes more state government documents open to public scrutiny, especially regarding how public dollars are spent. Most importantly, once the new law takes effect there will be a presumption in the law that all government records are open to public review unless specifically identified as non-public for a compelling reason.

As session wore on, other important reform efforts like campaign finance reform, reapportionment reform, and the convening of a constitutional convention seemed to get bogged down. They took a back seat to property tax reform, transportation issues, energy, and health-care concerns. While those are all important issues facing our Commonwealth, those of us who continued to push for reform became frustrated at the lagging interest in enacting a broader reform agenda. Then in July, ten current and former staffers, a sitting House member and a former House leader were indicted for their alleged involvement in taxpayer funded bonuses that had been given to state employees who had worked in political

campaigns. While it is neither unusual nor illegal for the staff of all four legislative caucuses to volunteer their free time to help in campaigns, what raised the issue of legality was the way that public funds had been used. I was shocked and angered when I learned of this affront to good government principles. If there is any good to come from this, it may be that it will renew efforts to enact more comprehensive reforms.

One measure that is critically needed is the reforming of campaign finance laws. After all, this recent incident was all about campaigns. We must rein in the cost of campaigns, reduce the influence of special interest groups, and allow for greater transparency in campaign finance reporting. Reforming the financing of campaigns and providing for more reporting would change the political culture of state politics. In addition, better auditing of legislative accounts is needed to ensure accountability of how public funds are spent.

The work of reform is far from over. I will continue to fight in Harrisburg for the kind of comprehensive reforms needed to change the political culture of Pennsylvania, root out inappropriate practices, and restore the public's faith and control of their state government.

Sincerely,

## Freeman bill would require more campaign finance disclosure

In May, the House State Government Committee passed legislation, sponsored by Rep. Freeman, that would require candidates to file campaign expense reports at more frequent intervals to create a more transparent record-keeping process during an election year.

The legislation (H.B. 2065) would require candidates for state House and Senate seats to file campaign expense reports on or before the sixth Tuesday prior to the election in addition to the second Friday before the election. They are currently required to file on the second Friday before the election. However, only candidates for statewide office are required to file by the sixth Tuesday prior to the election.

"The change would provide earlier disclosure and greater transparency on who is contributing to candidates for the General Assembly," Freeman said. "This will give the voting public a better understanding of which interest groups are getting behind which candidates."

Freeman said the second Friday before the election reports come so close to the election that the information about where a candidate is getting their contributions tends to get lost in the last week of campaign literature and other information.

"This measure would put everything on the table and allow voters to see who is backing which candidates and what they stand for or, more importantly, who they stand with," Freeman said.

The measure now moves to the full House for consideration.

## Capitol rally touts Freeman's bill to help municipalities

*Legislation would assist municipalities with high levels of tax exempt properties*

Legislation, sponsored by Rep. Freeman, that would provide state funding to municipalities to compensate them for high levels of tax-exempt property was the subject of a Capitol rally hosted by the Pennsylvania League of Cities and Municipalities in June. Mayors from across the Commonwealth as well as members of the Pennsylvania state associations of Township Commissioners, Township Supervisors, and Boroughs attended to show support for the bill.

House Bill 2018, known as the Tax Exempt Property Municipal Assistance Fund, would be funded by dedicating revenue generated by the current 18 percent Johnstown Flood Tax. Under the proposal, any Pennsylvania municipality where 15 percent or more of the total assessed value of properties within its borders is tax-exempt would qualify for compensation. The Johnstown Flood Tax, enacted by the state legislature in 1936 to provide financial relief to victims of flooding in Johnstown, is levied on the sale of wine and liquors. It was intended to be temporary, but now provides the state with approximately \$240 million in annual revenue.

"Municipalities with high percentages of tax-exempt properties are at a fiscal disadvantage which makes them unable to meet essential needs in their communities," Freeman said. "The funding this measure calls for would help these municipalities gain a greater degree of fiscal stability to provide essential services and help position them to attract much-needed economic development to help rebuild their eroded tax base."

The legislation would require that each county annually provide the state with information regarding the assessed value of tax-exempt properties. The funding formula within the legislation is based on the assessed value of those properties if they were taxable. No single municipality would receive more than 10 percent of the total revenue in the fund, and property owned by the municipality itself would not be eligible.

"Tax-exempt entities such as colleges, hospitals and county court houses are regional assets that don't generate tax revenue for their host communities," Freeman said. "It is unfair to expect these communities to shoulder the burden of a limited tax base while providing services to these tax-exempt facilities. With my legislation, we can stabilize hundreds of needy communities across Pennsylvania and ensure their success for years to come."

The bill was reported out of the House Local Government Committee and is pending in the House Appropriations Committee.



*Rep. Freeman speaks at a Capitol rally in June with mayors from across the Commonwealth and members of local government associations supporting his legislation (H.B. 2018).*

## Freeman proposal would update Elm Street Program, remove sunset provision

Legislation introduced by Rep. Freeman that would allow the Elm Street Program to continue beyond the sunset date of 2011 passed the House in March.

The Elm Street Program is an urban residential enhancement initiative that targets older established neighborhoods for revitalization. The concept was conceived by Freeman who authored the original Elm Street bill. In 2004, Gov. Ed Rendell held a bill signing ceremony in Easton for the legislation, which had passed the House and Senate unanimously.

"Elm Street has been extremely successful at stabilizing participating neighborhoods," Freeman said. "The program deserves to continue in order to help promote the ongoing revitalization of urban neighborhoods and enhance the quality of life in our older communities."

Freeman said more than two dozen neighborhoods in Pennsylvania have been designated as Elm Street communities, including Easton, Bethlehem and Allentown. More than 100 municipalities have been eligible for physical improvements in their neighborhoods through Elm Street residential reinvestment grants.

"This law can mean the difference between urban revitalization and urban blight," Freeman said. "It is critical to the well-being of some of our oldest communities in Pennsylvania."

Currently, the program provides up to five years of financial assistance for municipalities to hire an Elm Street manager to work with local officials and community groups to establish a plan for revitalizing targeted neighborhoods. House Bill 2233 would allow Elm Street managers to continue for up to an additional five years, if necessary.

The measure would also have Elm Street managers work to promote the establishment of consumer services, such as banks, grocery stores and pharmacies, in older urban residential neighborhoods.

Grants are used for administrative costs, and infrastructure and structural improvements such as sidewalk repairs, tree plantings and building façade work. The Elm Street manager also focuses on marketing plans; promoting home ownership and other housing options; addressing social and economic concerns in the targeted neighborhoods; and assessing current zoning codes and comprehensive plans to ensure their compatibility with revitalization efforts.

"Elm Street has gone a long way in helping these older neighborhoods come back to life," Freeman said. "They were once great places to live, work and raise families. Elm Street is helping to make them wonderful places to live in once again."

The Elm Street Program is administered by the state Department of Community and Economic Development, and is similar to the existing Main Street Program. Main Street focuses on revitalizing downtown commercial districts while Elm Street targets residential districts close to those commercial districts.

## An energy independence strategy that helps families go green

(Continued from page 1)

- **\$25 million for building or renovating homes and small businesses to make facilities certified green buildings**
- **\$25 million to develop and spur wind and geothermal renewable energy**
- **\$40 million for research and development funds to create alternative and renewable energy technology**
- **\$40 million to boost the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP)**
- **\$97.5 million to assist homeowners and small businesses with weatherization projects**
- **\$50 million in tax credits for people installing alternative-energy production systems in their homes or small businesses**
- **\$2.5 million to help companies consolidate computer servers, which use air-conditioning year round**
- **A 75-cent per gallon subsidy for biodiesel that is produced and sold here in Pennsylvania. Biodiesel is better for engines than traditional diesel. It burns cleaner and cuts down on emissions.**

While the EIS has many components to it, one particular bill (H.B. 2200) would provide for conservation as well as cost savings to consumers. The bill is currently pending in the Senate Consumer Protection and Professional Licensure Committee. Included in that legislation is Freeman's smart meters proposal (see related story). Freeman and other House members who have been promoting the energy package recently held a press conference in Harrisburg to urge Senate passage of these conservation measures.

## Freeman bill would allow housing authorities to establish police forces

A bill (H.B. 1674), sponsored by Rep. Freeman, that would allow public housing authorities to form police forces unanimously passed the House in June.

"Under current law, only housing authorities in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh have been allowed to form police forces," Freeman said. "Smaller cities and other municipalities across Pennsylvania have the same problems with crime. By allowing public housing authorities in these communities to form police forces, we would be able to add more police officers to help in the effort to combat crime."

Under the bill, housing authorities would be permitted to create police forces to patrol public housing projects. These officers would be required to complete the same course of instruction and accreditation as is required for municipal police officers under state law. Funding would come from public housing authority budgets for their own forces.

"Unfortunately, public housing projects can often be the site of higher levels of crime," Freeman said. "This is not fair to the law-abiding residents of those developments who are not engaged in criminal activity but whose lives could ultimately be in danger."

"With public housing authorities permitted to have their own police forces, municipal police in those communities would be freed up to address crime in other neighborhoods."

No housing authority would be required to form a police force, but would have the option to do so under Freeman's bill.

"Some authorities may choose to simply hire a detective rather than create a full-blown police force," Freeman said. "Either way, they could determine what would be the most appropriate approach to enhancing law enforcement efforts."

The idea for the legislation was recommended by Larry Hendershot who served on the Easton Housing Authority and is a former police officer.

The measure is in the Senate awaiting consideration.



*Rep. Freeman with members of the Delaware and Potomac Rivers Paddling Association in the House chamber on a recent visit to the Capitol. The association canoes waterways throughout the mid-Atlantic region.*

## School property tax reductions

Homeowners in Northampton County are seeing a reduction in their school property tax bills this year, thanks to revenue generated from Pennsylvania slot facilities.

Reductions for homeowners in the 136th Legislative District, listed by school district are:

**\$181 in Bethlehem Area School District**

**\$216 in Easton Area School District**

**\$184 in Saucon Valley School District**

**\$253 in Wilson Area School District**

Legislators continue to work on further reductions in school property taxes.

## Freeman smart meters legislation approved by House

In February, Rep. Freeman's proposal to require electric utilities to provide smart meters to their customers so that consumers can save money on their electric bills passed the House. The bill is in the Senate Consumer Protection and Professional Licensure Committee awaiting consideration.

The proposal would provide cost savings by giving customers the option to buy electricity at cheaper, off-peak periods. Freeman's smart-meter language was amended into H.B. 2200, a measure that would provide for the implementation of cost-effective programs to reduce energy demand and consumption in Pennsylvania.

Freeman said his measure would also require utilities to offer rate information that allows customers to voluntarily shift their electricity use to non-peak periods to save on their electric bills.

"Smart meters are an important part of any strategy to reduce energy costs for consumers and conserve energy," Freeman said. "Smart meters provide a direct cost savings to consumers that use them. The technology also benefits utilities by reducing energy demand at its most expensive peak period when the purchasing of energy by utilities is the most costly, thereby saving money for all utility customers."

Freeman's proposal gives utilities 10 years to phase in smart meters for all customers.

"In the Lehigh Valley, PPL has already installed a version of smart meters, allowing the utility to more easily identify power outages and the need for repairs, thereby cutting down on customer complaints," Freeman noted. "Smart-meter technology truly provides a win-win situation for both customers and utilities, and gets us closer to the goal of achieving real energy conservation."

## Extending utility rate caps

*Rep. Freeman co-sponsored legislation to extend electric rate caps*

A measure (Special Session House Bill 54) sponsored by House Environmental Resources and Energy Committee Chairman Camille "Bud" George, would extend rate-cap protection for at least two years to residential, commercial and industrial customers in Pennsylvania.

Freeman, a co-sponsor, said he agrees with George that the potential for excessive rates must be addressed. Those increases would be crushing to the average utility customer, making stopgap legislation imperative.

PPL's 1.4 million customers in 29 counties already face rate increases projected at 35 percent when its rate cap expires after Dec. 31, 2009. More than 2.7 million customers of PECO and FirstEnergy's Penelec and Met-Ed subsidiaries face double-digit rate increases when their rate caps expire after Dec. 31, 2010.

Illinois responded last year to sharply higher electric rates with \$1 billion in rate relief and creation of a state agency to buy electricity and build generators. Virginia and at least five other states abandoned or indefinitely delayed deregulation after realizing the broken promises of deregulation.

Under S.S.H.B. 54, utilities could seek annual rate-cap relief when they show significant changes in their costs. During the rate-cap extension, energy would be secured to ensure reliable service at the lowest, reasonable rates through a portfolio of long-term, short-term and spot market purchases and meeting alternative-energy requirements.

"We have to protect utility customers from these excessive increases, and extending the rate caps provides the most immediate protection," Freeman said.

## PA ABC: Making health-care insurance affordable

An ongoing concern in Pennsylvania is the number of individuals that don't have health-care coverage. The vast majority of these individuals are hard-working people who don't receive health care through their employer and cannot afford to pay costly premiums on their own due to their modest income.

Pennsylvania Access to Basic Care (PA ABC) is an innovative package of health care reforms being promoted by the House Democratic Caucus that would provide an affordable health-care product to uninsured Pennsylvanians. A combination of premiums, federal dollars, tobacco settlement funds and money from the state's medical malpractice fund would help pay for it.

This plan would provide more than 270,000 uninsured working Pennsylvanians access to basic health care. It would immediately provide affordable health insurance to the 80,000 Pennsylvanians who are on the adultBasic waiting list. To do this, House Democrats have developed a three-fold plan that would:

- help hundreds of thousands of working Pennsylvanians gain access to health insurance and lower the cost of health care for everyone;
- continue our commitment to helping doctors pay their medical malpractice insurance premiums; and
- help small business employers who already offer their employees health care.

In addition to those on the adultBasic waiting list, individuals who qualify:

- are between ages 19 and 64;
- must meet income guidelines;
- must legally reside in Pennsylvania for at least 90 days;
- are not eligible for Medicare or Medicaid; and
- are not covered by a plan for at least 180 days before applying.

"Enacting PA ABC would go a long way in addressing the health-care insurance needs of many hard-working Pennsylvanians by giving them peace of mind as they gain access to affordable health care," Freeman said.

### PA ABC annual household income guidelines

Single adult	Adult in family of 4	Monthly individual premium
\$15,600	\$31,800	\$0
\$15,601-\$18,200	\$31,801-\$37,100	\$40
\$18,201-\$20,800	\$37,101-\$42,400	\$50
\$20,801-\$31,200	\$42,401-\$63,600	\$311



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*from State Representative*  
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*Rep. Freeman welcomes students from Cheston Elementary School to the Capitol in May. They are pictured on the steps in the Capitol's main rotunda.*

## Look inside:

- **PA ABC: affordable health insurance legislation**
- **Smart meters help save money on electricity**
- **Governor signs Freeman bill to preserve Appalachian Trail**

## MY OFFICE CAN HELP YOU WITH

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### Web page

[www.pahouse.com/freeman](http://www.pahouse.com/freeman)

- PACE (pharmaceutical assistance for qualified senior citizens)
- Voter registration forms and absentee ballot applications
- Property Tax/Rent Rebate forms (for qualified seniors)
- PHEAA (Pa. Higher Education Assistance Agency)
- NowU — Pa.'s 529 College Savings Plan
- Requests for state informational materials
- AdultBasic insurance program information
- CHIP (Children's Health Insurance Program) information
- Obtaining birth or death certificates
- PennDOT problems or questions — including disability license plates and placards
- Questions or problems with any state agency
- Tours of the state Capitol for individuals or groups
- Citations from the House of Representatives for outstanding local accomplishments and important family milestones