

State Rep. Greg Vitali
D-Delaware
www.pahouse.com/Vitali

Pennsylvania budget shortchanges environment

Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf recently signed into law a package of budget bills for the commonwealth's 2019-20 fiscal year. These bills are reflective of a governor and legislative leaders who do not prioritize environmental protection.

DEP Staffing

Most importantly, the budget failed to address the chronic understaffing of the Pennsylvania Department of Environment Protection – the state agency charged with enforcing environmental laws. The DEP has suffered almost a 30 percent reduction in staff since 2002, losing over 900 positions. This understaffing has compromised its ability to reduce air and water pollution, regulate oil and gas development, combat climate change, plug abandoned oil and gas wells and protect the Chesapeake Bay.

Environmental Fund Transfers

Consistent with Governor Wolf's budget proposal in February, money was taken from three important environmental funds to pay for general governmental operations in the upcoming fiscal year.

Over \$16 million was taken from the Environmental Stewardship Fund – commonly known as Growing Greener. This fund provides monies for farmland preservation, open space protection, abandoned mine reclamation, watershed protection and restoration, water and sewer infrastructure and community parks and recreational facilities.

Ten million dollars was taken from the Recycling Fund, which supports municipal recycling programs by helping to pay for recycling trucks, processing equipment, staff salaries, composting programs and consumer education.

Almost \$70 million was taken from the Oil and Gas Lease Fund, which was created to finance conservation, recreation, dams and flood-control projects. A 2017 Pennsylvania Supreme Court decision prohibits using revenue from this fund for any purpose other than conservation. This budget transfer appears blatantly unconstitutional.

None of the above three programs comes anywhere near meeting current demand. To make matters worse, authority was given to the Pennsylvania legislature to take monies from the Environmental Stewardship Fund and Recycling Fund on a continuing basis and was not limited to just this fiscal year.

Delaware River Basin Commission

This budget failed to provide Pennsylvania's fair share of funding for the Delaware River Basin Commission. DRBC is an interstate agency charged with the responsibility to manage, protect and improve the water resources for more than 13 million people. The commonwealth's Fair Share contribution is \$893,000 this year, according to the DRBC. The budget provided only \$217,000. Since 2015, the majority Republican legislature has blocked full funding of the DRBC in retaliation for the Commission's refusal to allow fracking in the Delaware River basin.

Plastics

A last-minute provision added by Senate Majority Leader Jake Corman, R-Centre, prohibits the commonwealth and its local governments from regulating plastic bags for one year, which is just enough time to block it again in next year's budget. Senator Corman's district includes a plastic bag manufacturing plant owned by Novolex, the world's largest manufacturer of single-use plastic bags. Wolf vetoed a similar provision in 2017, saying it violated the Environmental Rights Amendment to the state constitution. There was no veto this time.

RGGI

There was some hope that this budget might include legislative authorization for Pennsylvania to join the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative. RGGI is a 10 state cap-and-trade program designed to reduce carbon dioxide emissions from the electric power sector. Pennsylvania is a major greenhouse gas emitter and joining RGGI would be perhaps the most important thing the commonwealth could do to curb its emissions. The final budget contained no RGGI language.

Conclusion

Environmental protection fared very poorly in this budget but it was not due to tight fiscal times. In fact, Pennsylvania's Independent Fiscal Office recently projected an \$866 million budget surplus for the fiscal year that just ended. Moreover, this budget will deposit almost \$300 million into Pennsylvania's rainy day fund.

Most of these damaging environmental provisions were demanded by Republican budget negotiators and, in the end, Governor Wolf was not willing to fight hard enough to keep them from

happening. For too long, environmental protection has been the bargaining chip that Democrats in Pennsylvania have traded to get other things.

It's easy to pay lip service to environmental protection but the critical environmental problems facing our commonwealth won't be addressed in any meaningful way until more people are elected on both sides of the aisle that are truly committed to environmental protection.

State Rep. Greg Vitali, D-Delaware/Montgomery, represents the 166th Legislative District. He can be reached at gvitali@pahouse.net.

###js/2019/

I:\print\Columns&Letters\BudgetRaid.166

CONTACT: Jim Strine

House Democratic Communications Office

Phone: 717-787-7895

Email: LCO-Southeast@pahouse.net