Update on the 2015/16 state budget

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A few highlights of the governor’s comprehensive plan include:
- Restoring devastating cuts to public education by investing $660 million more in Pre-K through 12 education and nearly $150 million more in higher education;
- Expanding home and community-based long-term care to enable more older Pennsylvanians to obtain care and remain in their homes;
- Restoring, over three years, the $84 million state budget cut to county human services programs;
- Reducing the waiting list for individuals with intellectual disabilities and adults with autism;
- Providing targeted investments to grow the economy and good jobs;
- Reducing homeowner property taxes; and
- Closing the budget gap without accounting gimmicks.

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Over the course of the next few weeks, leading up to the June 30 budget deadline, budget negotiations will intensify. I will continue to review all aspects of the governor’s proposal and advocate for a responsible spending plan that restores past funding cuts without resorting to one-time spending gimmicks. The General Assembly will then enact a new spending plan and submit it to the governor for his signature.

I, like the governor, believe Pennsylvania must embark on a bold new path and break away from the status quo that led to the structural deficit, underfunding of our schools, higher property taxes and multiple downgrades to Pennsylvania’s credit rating.

Proposed Funding for School Districts in the 25th District

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School District</th>
<th>County</th>
<th>2014/15 Funding</th>
<th>2015/16 Proposed Funding</th>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>Percent Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>East Allegheny</td>
<td>Allegheny</td>
<td>$7,549,346</td>
<td>$8,353,911</td>
<td>$804,565</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gateway</td>
<td>Allegheny</td>
<td>$9,303,363</td>
<td>$10,067,008</td>
<td>$763,645</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plum Borough</td>
<td>Allegheny</td>
<td>$15,278,177</td>
<td>$16,029,950</td>
<td>$751,773</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woodland Hills</td>
<td>Allegheny</td>
<td>$18,120,102</td>
<td>$20,949,928</td>
<td>$2,829,826</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penn-Trafford</td>
<td>Westmoreland</td>
<td>$16,610,040</td>
<td>$17,239,401</td>
<td>$629,361</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25th District Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>$66,861,028</td>
<td>$72,640,198</td>
<td>$5,779,170</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Includes Basic and Special Education Funding, Ready to Learn/Accountability Block Grant, Educational Assistance, Charter Reimbursement, and Basic Ed Formula Enhancements.

Working to improve safety at Monroeville Mall

I share your concerns regarding recent incidents in and around Monroeville Mall.

Public safety is a priority. Please know that I am closely monitoring the situation, and I will provide any assistance possible to keep our community safe.

I believe recent changes and proactive monitoring will help address the problem.

The reopening of the police station in Monroeville Mall gives law enforcement a visible presence there, and sends a clear message that violence and other illegal activity will not be tolerated.

I believe recent changes and proactive monitoring will help prevent future incidents.

In addition, I support the mall’s decision to require youths younger than 18 to be accompanied by an adult on weekend nights to help prevent future incidents.

However, other steps may be necessary, and local, county and state officials must work together to develop strategies that keep law-abiding citizens safe while visiting our region’s retail hub.

If you have any thoughts or suggestions, please email me at jmarkosek@pahouse.net.
Tougher laws needed to address distracted driving

Did you know there were more than 14,000 distracted driving crashes in Pennsylvania in 2013, which killed 65 people? I think we should take steps to reduce those numbers. That is why I introduced legislation to expand our current distracted driving law to include a ban on the use of handheld devices while driving.

The legislation that I introduced, House Bill 652, would permit hands-free use of communication devices. However, teens and novice drivers would be prohibited from using all handheld and hands-free devices while driving.

Exceptions to the prohibitions would include the use of a GPS system, occasions when the vehicle is stopped because of a traffic obstruction or when a phone call is initiated.

My legislation would also require the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation to develop a public education campaign regarding the dangers of distracted driving.

Pennsylvania certainly made a step in the right direction when it banned texting while driving, but we can do more to keep our roads as safe as possible.

Protecting PACE/PACENET eligibility for seniors

Thousands of Pennsylvania seniors will keep their prescription drug coverage under legislation that I supported.

The new law maintains eligibility for Pennsylvania seniors in PACE and PACENET if their Social Security cost-of-living adjustment pushes them over the income eligibility limit through 2015.

Without this legislation, more than 40,000 seniors would have lost their prescription drug coverage because their relatively small cost-of-living increase would have pushed them over the income limit.

The law also allows applicants to exclude the cost of their Medicare Part B premiums from being counted as income. Those premiums, which cover certain doctors’ services, outpatient care, medical supplies and preventive services, are automatically deducted from a person’s Social Security before the check is direct-deposited. This change helps an additional 8,200 seniors qualify for PACE or PACENET.

If you are 65 or older and need help paying for your prescriptions, please contact my Monroeville office to learn more about PACE and PACENET.

Property Tax/Rent Rebate Program

Applications are now available to apply for the Property Tax/Rent Rebate Program. Pennsylvanians 65 or older, widows and widowers 50 or older, and people with permanent disabilities 16 or older may qualify for the program. The annual income limit for homeowners is $35,000 and $15,000 for renters. When calculating your annual income, you only need to count half of your Social Security income.

The maximum standard rebate is $650. Thanks to the enactment of Act 156, which I voted for last year, Social Security cost-of-living adjustments no longer disqualify those applying for a rebate. The deadline to apply has been extended to Dec. 31. Forms are available in my Monroeville office. My staff will be happy to help you apply for free.

Good news on Medicaid expansion

I congratulate Gov. Tom Wolf for implementing traditional Medicaid expansion.

Expanding Medicaid will help roughly 500,000 Pennsylvanians obtain health care – including 23,000 veterans and 10,000 of their family members – while creating an estimated 40,000 jobs in our state.

In addition, the federal government is providing 100 percent of the funding for the first three years, and 90 percent of the funding in subsequent years.

By opting for Medicaid expansion, the governor is putting Pennsylvanians first and saying yes to $40 billion that will come into the state over the next 10 years under the federal Affordable Care Act.

Medicaid expansion funds will create many jobs, generate more tax income and help many people get or stay healthy.

Taking on cyberbullies

Bullies have always been around, using words, threats and occasional violence to harass others.

The increased popularity of portable electronic devices, such as smart phones and notebook computers, gives bullies other avenues for harassment. They can use social media platforms to harass young people 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

I believe the law has to change with the times. For this reason, I voted for House Bill 229 earlier this year, which passed the House and would create the crime of cyber harassment of a child.

Repeatedly commenting on a child’s sexual orientation, sexual activity, mental health or physical characteristics would also be treated as a crime if it was intended to cause “substantial emotional distress … and produces some physical manifestation of the distress.”

The crime would be graded as a third-degree misdemeanor for adults, carrying a maximum penalty of a year in prison. Children charged under this legislation would be referred to juvenile court.

We need to have a deterrent in place and the means to punish offenders, because cyberbullying can have terrible consequences.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, bullied kids are more likely to experience depression and anxiety; loss of interest in activities; health complaints; and, most importantly, decreased academic achievement and school participation.

In addition, a small number of bullied children might retaliate through extremely violent measures. In 12 of 15 school shooting cases in the 1990s, the shooters had a history of being bullied.

Around the district

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Policy Committee Hearing regarding Pre-K funding with state Reps. Ed Gainey (left) and Mike Sturla at Hosanna House Inc. in Wilkinsburg.

Receiving the Pennsylvania Food Merchants Association’s “Friend of the Food Industry” award in February.

Monroeville Area Chamber of Commerce breakfast in January.

Celebrating the opening of the expanded fitness center at the Monroeville Senior Citizens Center in May.

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