



YOUR REPORT

from State Representative

ROBERT FREEMAN

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Making health insurance more affordable

Permitting the State Workers’ Insurance Fund board to sell health insurance would make health insurance more affordable, under legislation (H.B. 1679) introduced by Rep. Robert Freeman.

The State Workers’ Insurance Fund within the Department of Labor and Industry was established to provide a workers’ compensation program for Pennsylvania businesses that could not get workers’ compensation insurance in the private sector. It is currently only permitted to sell workers’ compensation insurance. However, Freeman’s bill would expand its offerings to include health insurance, which could be purchased by individuals or businesses for their employees.

“By allowing SWIF to offer health insurance as a public option, it would make a quality insurance product available to Pennsylvanians at a lower cost than current private insurance rates because of its lower administrative overhead. A public option would create more competition within the health insurance market to help drive rates down,” Freeman said.

“Health insurance rates continue to rise. I believe this proposal will effectively bring health care policies back to an affordable range for the average Pennsylvanian. It also would offer a less costly alternative to the current private health insurance plans available today,” he said. “A public option like my proposal would also serve as a yardstick to measure the fairness of rates charged by private insurance companies.”

No tax dollars would be used to subsidize the public option because the offering would be funded from premiums paid by subscribers and a loan from the SWIF, which would be paid back.

Freeman introduces property tax circuit breaker legislation

Homeowners would be protected from property tax overload under legislation (H.B. 2074) introduced by Rep. Robert Freeman.

“Many families and especially older Pennsylvanians on a fixed income are struggling to stay in their homes as property taxes rise and the bills get more difficult to pay,” Freeman said.

“A property tax circuit breaker is quite simple: it would protect taxpayers from a property tax overload just like an electric circuit breaker. Specifically, it would allow local taxing authorities to exempt a taxpayer from paying the portion of their property tax that exceeds a certain set percentage of their household income.”

Freeman said that the proposal would offer homeowners needed property tax relief and build fairness into the property tax system.

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Freeman bill would help communities with high percentage of tax-exempt properties

Municipalities with high levels of tax-exempt property, such as colleges and universities, nonprofit medical facilities, government offices or state forests and game lands would be eligible for financial assistance from the state, under legislation introduced by Rep. Robert Freeman.

“Because of the effect tax-exempt properties have on the real estate tax base of several communities in the Lehigh Valley and across Pennsylvania, those communities often have difficulty providing the essential services expected from local government. By providing annual funding to these municipalities, we can enable them to fix and maintain infrastructure and to provide the essential services that ensure the health and safety of their residents,” Freeman said.

Under H.B. 1677, municipalities with 15 percent or more of their total assessed property value as tax exempt would be funded by the state’s existing 18 percent Liquor Tax, known as the Johnstown Flood Tax.

“The tax helped to rebuild Johnstown after it was devastated by a flood in 1936,” Freeman said. “That was a long time ago, and it’s time to target that money to municipalities that are falling further into financial distress simply because they have significant amounts of tax-exempt properties within their boundaries that have contributed to eroding their tax base.

“This legislation can help hundreds of communities across our commonwealth and provide fiscal stability to those municipalities facing fiscal distress.

“Communities should not be forced to bear the loss of essential tax revenue because they contain regional institutions that are tax exempt,” Freeman noted.

For example, in the case of Easton, over 27 percent of the total assessed value of property is tax exempt, while Fountain Hill has over 40 percent.

Freeman’s bill was reported out of committee on Jan. 27 by a 22-1 vote and heads to the full House for consideration.

Giving abandoned factory buildings new life

“The adaptive reuse of an old factory or mill for retail, office or arts space, new manufacturing enterprises or transforming them into dwellings, encourages economic development and improves the quality of life of a community,” Rep. Robert Freeman said.

That’s why he’s reintroduced a bill to create new tax incentives to promote redevelopment and reuse of vacant factory or mill buildings.

“Using a building for the purpose other than which it was originally intended is a way to reuse buildings that have stood in our communities for decades. Some of the buildings have withstood the test of time for more than 100 years. They might be vacant, but they are still standing. My bill would provide an incentive to breathe new life into these buildings – many of which are part of a community’s heritage and identity.”

Freeman’s H.B. 1836 would establish three types of tax incentive programs: a tax credit for rehabbing costs, a business tax credit for employee salaries to foster decent paying job opportunities, and an interest income tax credit on loans associated with rehabbing and improvements to the building.

Easton historic preservationist Tom Jones proposed the legislation to Freeman.

Freeman bill would establish tutoring program in Pa. public schools

Rep. Robert Freeman is looking to improve academic performance in elementary schools. Under legislation he has introduced, students in 11th and 12th grades would receive academic credit for tutoring elementary school-aged children.

“The benefits of high school students tutoring elementary students is abundant. Tutoring can increase good study habits, improve academic performance, boost self-esteem and can put students in charge of their own learning process and pass that knowledge onto others,” Freeman said. “The students being tutored get the extra attention they need to improve their academic performance and are typically more receptive to learning from a high school student who would serve as a mentor.”

Freeman said his legislation (H.B. 1678) would require the state Board of Education to establish in-house tutoring programs in all Pennsylvania school districts.

“Tutoring is a time-honored and cost-effective way to enhance academic performance for the student being tutored and the student who serves as a tutor,” Freeman said.

School districts would be able to implement the program at little or no cost to taxpayers and it would foster a sense of community and pride in students, according to Freeman.



Rep. Freeman speaks with students from Avona Elementary School in the Capitol Rotunda. The Wilson Area School District students visited the Pennsylvania Capitol on a class trip in June 2019.

Examining the legislature's expenses

Rep. Robert Freeman has introduced legislation to require the state auditor general to audit the General Assembly's expenses and its legislative services agencies annually.

"We need to have greater transparency and more accountability as to how the legislature spends taxpayers' money," Freeman said. "An outside, unbiased auditor, such as the state's auditor general, should be reviewing our expenses and issuing a report instead of a private auditing firm that is hired by the legislature to perform an internal audit on ourselves."

The General Assembly currently is audited by a certified public accountant hired by the Legislative Audit Advisory Commission, but the auditor general has offered his department's services to help increase openness and is supportive of Freeman's legislation.

"We continually talk of financial transparency, so this is a chance for us to open the books and reveal just how taxpayers' money is being spent by the legislature and to save on auditing costs in the process," Freeman said.

House recognizes value in extending Main Street Program participation

Last year, the state House of Representatives unanimously passed Rep. Robert Freeman's legislation that would allow communities to extend their participation in the state's Main Street program from five years to 10.

The Freeman bill would cover up to an additional five years of administrative costs associated with employing a Main Street manager if it is determined it would help the community reach its revitalization goals.

The Main Street Act is designed to provide assistance and resources to municipalities in preparing and implementing a revitalization and enhancement strategy for downtown commercial districts.

"This legislation is needed because few grants are available for the administrative costs associated with hiring and maintaining a Main Street manager," Freeman said. "This limited funding for the managers can hinder the success of the Main Street program. Five years is often too short for Main Street programs to thrive and succeed in their objectives, but my bill would give Main Street communities more time to implement their revitalization strategy and be a success."

The bill (H.B. 1243) is now before the state Senate for consideration.



Rep. Freeman with Easton Main Street Manager Kim Kmetz seated at his desk in the House chamber on her visit to the Capitol in April 2019.

2020 Census: Make sure you're counted!

It's 2020, and in addition to the start of a new decade, it's also a year for the census.

The census counts every person living in the United States. Census data is used for many things -- from how much money the federal government gives Pennsylvania to support vital programs, to how many seats the state has in Congress. If you're not counted, the state loses funding and influence.

This year it will be even easier to make sure you and your family are counted. Starting April 1, you can respond online, by paper or over the phone. Visit 2020Census.gov for more information. Starting in February, Easton residents can go online at eastonyoucount.com for more information.

Please make sure to fill out the census; make sure you're counted!

Local projects benefit from state funding

Rep. Robert Freeman's legislative district received a number of state grants in 2019. Below is a list of some of the projects receiving state funding that Freeman helped secure:

- \$25,000 for Easton to develop a citywide economic development strategy to build a stronger community.
- \$219,640 to assist in replacing the Lower Saucon Road Bridge.
- \$25,000 to develop a historical plan for the 47-mile Lehigh Canal.
- \$3 million to renovate an older building and construct an addition on Northampton Street in Easton for commercial space, parking, apartments and a restaurant.
- \$750,000 to renovate Easton's old Heritage Lanes bowling alley for office space.
- \$1 million for 55 affordable apartments at the South Side Easton Stewart Silk Mill Black Diamond site.
- \$1.33 million for safety improvements along Bushkill Drive in Easton.
- \$700,000 for Lafayette College to analyze and design trails, parks and greenways along the Bushkill corridor.
- \$1.37 million for a new energy-efficient elementary school in Palmer Township.
- \$1 million for safety and streetscape improvements in Easton's College Hill neighborhood.
- \$1.42 million for a 520-kw zero-emissions hydro facility in Easton on the Lehigh Canal.
- \$225,000 for streetscape and pedestrian improvements around the Northampton County Courthouse.
- \$60,000 for Freemansburg to buy a tractor for weed and lawn trimming.
- \$228,200 to rehab and develop Hellertown's Authority Park.
- \$200,000 to rehab and develop Wy-Hit-Tuk County Park in Williams Township.
- \$50,000 to the Greater Easton Development Partnership for a pickup truck, rototiller, cold storage and greenhouse to increase its food yield.
- \$2,265 to Easton Area Neighborhood Center for a tractor, rototiller and bed shaper.

House votes to mandate ethics requirements for Act 47 coordinators

The state House of Representatives has passed legislation prime-sponsored by Rep. Robert Freeman that would require coordinators appointed to assist Act 47 financially distressed municipalities to comply with state ethics laws.

It also would prohibit a coordinator or receiver from receiving any compensation, fee or commission from the distressed municipality.

"This proposal would ensure that people who are appointed to help troubled municipalities are not compromised financially in any way whatsoever, so they can provide an honest assessment of the local issues in facilitating recovery plans," Freeman said.

While there are specific qualifications for appointing a recovery coordinator or receiver, they are currently not covered by the requirements of the state Ethics Act. Freeman said this bill, which was drafted by the Local Government Commission, would help them avoid conflicts of interest, nepotism and self-dealing in contracts, for example.

House Bill 1246 is now before the state Senate for consideration.

Personal Notes...

On Public Service and Civic Engagement

Dear Friends,

On May 3rd of last year, I was very flattered and honored to be named as the 2019 Easton Area High School Day Honoree for my years of public service as a State Representative. Below are excerpts of my address to the students at Easton Area High School who assembled in the High School gym for the ceremony.

“I know that today in America, politics is not widely held in high regard. However, I am here to tell you that public service is one of the noblest professions to be in. Not for the fame, for fame is fleeting. Public service should never be about one’s own personal gain or ego. That is not what being an elected official is all about. It is about giving something back to the community that you came from. It is about being an advocate for the people you represent and for those public policy initiatives that can truly make a difference in people’s lives and make for a better society. And it is about commitment to the principles of our democracy and to the democratic institutions that protect and preserve our rights as citizens.”

“Not everyone has to be in the political arena to make a difference. You can make a difference in just about any walk of life. However, as good citizens everyone does need to be engaged. That doesn’t mean having to run for public office, but it does call upon all of us to engage in the political process at whatever level. Volunteering to work in campaigns, following the debate over the important issues of the day, wading into the discussion in a thoughtful way, with civility and respect, in order to contribute to reasoned public dialogue that can facilitate informed decisions and sound outcomes. Engagement also means registering to vote and voting in elections.... Voting is our most cherished right in a democracy, but it is also our duty as citizens of this country.”

“One of the things that I learned from my parents that has helped me in public service, but really applies to all aspects of life, is to always lead by example. Your name is the most valuable thing in this world that you possess. How you conduct yourself along the way is in many ways more important than the successes that will be realized in the course of your life.”

“No matter what you choose to do in life, whether in the public realm or the private sector, strive to make the world a better place through your actions and involvement and through every gesture, both large and small. Work for the common good and show compassion. The human spirit shines at its brightest when it shows empathy for others and when it puts the greater good, the common good above personal gain and personal aggrandizement. As former Israeli prime minister and President Shimon Peres observed, ‘We need a generation that sees leadership as a noble cause, not defined by personal ambition, but by morality and a call to service.’”

This was my message on Easton Area High School Day. In these troubled political times as our nation seems more polarized and divided than it has been in decades, it is important that we all participate in civic engagement, but in a civil and respectful way that can lead to more promising outcomes for our communities, our state, and our country. In that respect, we, as citizens, are all public servants.

Sincerely,



Bob Freeman



Rep. Freeman (EAHS Class of 1975) addresses students at the Easton Area High School Day ceremony on May 3, 2019. Freeman was chosen as the 2019 Honoree for EAHS Day in recognition of his years of public service.



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Rep. Freeman makes himself available to meet with constituents from the western end of his district in Hellertown Borough Hall on the first Thursday of every month from 10:30 a.m. until 2:30 p.m.

Transparency is behind Freeman bill to require candidates to file additional campaign finance reports

State Rep. Robert Freeman has introduced legislation that would require Pennsylvania House and Senate candidates to file campaign expense reports at more frequent intervals in order to create a more transparent record-keeping process during an election year.

The legislation (H.B. 2142) would require candidates for the Pennsylvania General Assembly to make an additional filing, six weeks out from an election in addition to the current report filed on the second Friday before an election.

“The change would provide greater transparency on who is contributing to General Assembly candidates,” Freeman said. “This is information voters should have access to earlier in a campaign than they currently do.”

The currently required expense report is filed just 10 days before the election. Freeman said that filing comes so close to the election that the information about where a candidate receives contributions from tends to get lost in the last week of campaign literature and other information.

“This 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.