

Senate News Brief

from Senate Republicans

"I am very pleased this important grant program is part of the proposed 2006-07 budget, but more importantly we are establishing the funding for this year through House Bill 599 as amended so the Commonwealth can also offer these grants to our emergency responders this year."

-- **Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee Chairman Don White (R-Indiana)** on Senate passage of a measure that would provide \$25 million for the Volunteer Fire Company and the Volunteer Ambulance Service Grant Act.

Preview

SENATE TO EXAMINE SPENDING INCREASE PROPOSED BY GOVERNOR

THE SENATE WILL THOROUGHLY EXAMINE Gov. Ed Rendell's proposed \$25.4 billion general fund budget for fiscal year 2006-07 over the next several months.

The budget unveiled by the governor during a joint session of the General Assembly on Wednesday includes a real year-over-year increase of \$1.16 billion (4.77 percent).

Although the governor has in the past claimed that his budget proposals fall within the common-sense spending controls spelled out in the Taxpayer Fairness Act, this year's budget clearly does not. According to calculations by the Senate Republican Appropriations office, the TFA would allow for increased spending of about \$842 million -- a growth rate of 3.47 percent over last year's \$24.27 billion budget.

The Senate Appropriations Committee will review the governor's proposals in depth during its annual series of budget hearings. The budget hearings are set for the weeks of February 27 and March 6.

Review

SENATE APPROVES BIPARTISAN PROPERTY TAX REFORM PLAN

SEEKING TO PROVIDE STATE TAXPAYERS WITH PROPERTY TAX RELIEF and help seniors on fixed incomes, the State Senate approved a reform measure Monday that would enable communities to shift school funding dollar-for-dollar from property taxes to earned income taxes.

Under an amendment sponsored by **Senate Majority Leader David Brightbill (R-Lebanon)**, House Bill 39 would bolster the Commonwealth's existing Property Tax and Rent Rebate Program to provide relief to an estimated additional 281,000 Pennsylvanians. Unlike other proposals that sought to increase the state personal income tax or increase the sales tax, the Senate plan gives local communities the first word in determining whether to switch to a new school tax system and the last word in deciding on future property tax increases. For more on the Pennsylvania Taxpayer Relief Act, please see In the Spotlight, below.

SENATE APPROVES \$25 MILLION IN GRANTS FOR EMERGENCY RESPONDERS

A MEASURE THAT WOULD PROVIDE \$25 MILLION for the Volunteer Fire Company and the Volunteer Ambulance Service Grant Act for the current fiscal year was approved by the Senate on Wednesday.

The grant program received strong support from both the Senate and House last year, but the funding was not included as part of the budget for Fiscal Year 2005-06 that was enacted last July.

Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee Chairman Don White (R-Indiana) proposed an amendment to House Bill 599 to provide the funding, which would be used to improve and enhance the capabilities of volunteer fire companies and ambulance services across the Commonwealth.

The amended bill was returned to the House of Representatives. For details, please see Fast Facts, below.

SENATE APPROVES BILL TO AID EVACUATIONS DURING EMERGENCIES

THE SENATE APPROVED LEGISLATION TUESDAY that would help communities evacuate more quickly in times of disaster emergencies.

Senate Bill 1056, sponsored by **Sen. John Pippy (R-Allegheny)**, would allow drivers with a Class C (passenger vehicle) license to operate a school bus or other commercial vehicle during a declared emergency without having to obtain a commercial driver's license.

The measure would apply under the direction of authorized emergency management personnel in a time of a declared federal, state or local emergency. Senate Bill 1056 was sent to the House of Representatives for consideration.

SENATE APPROVES BILL TO COMBAT UNDERAGE, IRRESPONSIBLE DRINKING

THE SENATE APPROVED LEGISLATION TUESDAY THAT'S PART OF A COMPREHENSIVE EFFORT AIMED at curbing underage irresponsible drinking.

The measure, sponsored by **Senate Law and Justice Committee Chairman John Rafferty (R-Montgomery)**, is part of a 14-bill package of legislation.

Senate Bill 969 would mandate Responsible Alcohol Management Program (RAMP) training for bar/restaurant operators who are cited for selling alcohol to a minor or to a visibly intoxicated person.

Senate Bill 969 was sent to the House of Representatives.

SENATE VOTES TO ENSURE VoIP FEES USED TO SUPPORT COUNTY E-911 CENTERS

THE SENATE APPROVED LEGISLATION TUESDAY sponsored by **Sen. Jake Corman (R-Centre)** requiring voice over Internet (VoIP) providers to forward E-911 fees to the Commonwealth to support county emergency dispatch centers.

Many VoIP companies collect fees for providing 911 services to customers, but Pennsylvania has no law that compels them to forward those 911 fees back to the Commonwealth like traditional and wireless phone companies must do. Senate Bill 936 requires all interconnected VoIP companies to forward fee revenue to the Commonwealth, which would send it to counties. The bill was sent to the House of Representatives for consideration.

SENATE ACTS TO MAKE TIRE PILE POLLUTERS PAY

LEGISLATION THAT WOULD FORCE THOSE RESPONSIBLE FOR WASTE TIRE PILES to reimburse state taxpayers for cleanup was approved by the Senate on Monday.

House Bill 1114 clarifies current law to indicate that a person or municipality deemed by the state Department of Environmental Protection to have contributed to the creation of the waste tire pile would have 30 days to either reimburse the Commonwealth for grant moneys used to remediate the site or appeal the amount or its contribution to the waste tire pile. It would also extend the time to recover grant money expended under the act to 20 years from the date of discovery of a waste tire pile.

The bill, which now goes to the governor, was approved by the Senate Environmental Resources and Energy Committee, chaired by **Sen. Mary Jo White (R-Venango)**, in June.

In the Spotlight

THE PENNSYLVANIA TAXPAYER RELIEF ACT has three major benefits to taxpayers: It provides the opportunity for significant school real estate tax relief, beginning in 2006; it doubles the size of the Property Tax and Rent Rebate Program for low-income seniors in Pennsylvania; and it implements the backend referendum -- voter controls on future property tax increases -- in every district across the state.

It would give school districts the option to increase their Earned Income Tax (EIT) rate in exchange for a reduction in their property taxes. Districts that do not elect to do so would be required to place a referendum question on the 2007 ballot to allow taxpayers to authorize such an increase.

Fast Facts

SENATE APPROVES GRANTS FOR FIRST RESPONDERS

- Grants to volunteer fire and rescue companies would range from \$2,500 to \$15,000.
- Funds could be used for construction or renovation of the fire company's primary structure; purchase or repair of firefighting, ambulance or rescue equipment; training; or debt reduction associated with the above.
- Grants to volunteer ambulance services would range from \$2,500 to \$10,000.
- Funds could be used for construction or renovation of the ambulance company's primary structure; purchase or repair of ambulance equipment; office equipment and support services, training; or debt reduction associated with the above.

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