

Senate News Brief

from Senate Republicans

"If Governor Rendell had signed that legislation, we wouldn't still be here working to fix the law and protect the citizens of our Commonwealth."

– **Sen. Jane Orié (R-Allegheny)**, on Governor Rendell's 2004 veto of ethics and anti-corruption reforms to the state gaming law. The Senate approved a new reform package on Sept. 27.

Preview

PANEL TO HOLD PUBLIC HEARING ON CLEAN STREAMS LAW

THE SENATE Environmental Resources and Energy Committee, chaired by **Sen. Mary Jo White (R-Venango)**, will hold a public hearing today on proposed changes to the state Clean Streams Law.

House Bill 2042 amends the Clean Streams Law to increase the grading and penalties for violations of the statute. The Attorney General's office believes this legislation will better align the Commonwealth with the provisions of the federal Clean Water Act.

Review

SENATE PASSES COMPREHENSIVE REFORM OF PA SLOTS LAW

THE SENATE ON SEPT. 27 APPROVED a major overhaul of Pennsylvania's gaming law to guard against influence peddling and corruption, strengthen enforcement, and ensure accountability and integrity in the casino licensing process.

Approval of Senate Bill 862, sponsored by **Sen. John Pippy (R-Allegheny)**, came two years after Governor Rendell vetoed a similar gambling reform bill designed to eliminate conflicts of interest and open the process up to more public input.

Senate Bill 862 was amended to eliminate the 1 percent ownership threshold for public officials; establish a Code of Conduct for the Gaming Control Board; ensure that the Gaming Control Board is subject to the Right-to-Know Act, the Sunshine Law, and other open-government laws; and clarify the authority of the Attorney General regarding gambling crimes. The amended Senate Bill 862 was sent to the House of Representatives for consideration. [For additional reforms contained in Senate Bill 862, please see *Fast Facts*, below.](#)

SENATE ACTS TO EXTEND MCARE PROGRAM, RETAIN PA DOCTORS

THE SENATE PASSED LEGISLATION SEPT. 26 that would extend the state's MCARE abatement program for an additional year and help to improve health care by keeping doctors in the Commonwealth.

The four-year-old program helps physicians pay a portion of their medical malpractice insurance premiums. It was set to expire December 31, 2007. Senate Bill 972, sponsored by **Sen. John Rafferty (R-Montgomery)**, would extend the program to December 31, 2008.

In the last several years, the percentage of resident physicians who trained in Pennsylvania and then stayed in the state to practice fell significantly.

The measure now moves back to the House for concurrence on Senate amendments. [For more on extending MCARE, please see *In the Spotlight*, below.](#)

FARMERS FIRST: SENATE PASSES HEALTHY FARMS AND HEALTHY SCHOOLS BILL

THE SENATE APPROVED LEGISLATION SEPT. 25 that will promote the state's agricultural products and encourage young people to eat a healthier diet.

Senate Bill 1209, sponsored by **Senate Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee Chairman Mike Waugh (R-York)**, would create the Healthy Farms and Healthy Schools initiative, a program to deliver locally-grown farm products to school students. The legislation would help children choose healthy alternatives such as fruits and vegetables over snacks that are high in salt, sugar and fats. The bill would also support local farmers, who will provide the food products to schools.

The Healthy Farms and Healthy Schools program will also provide educators with greater resources for nutrition and agricultural education. The program will include field trips to nearby farms so children can learn more about the agricultural community.

A Healthy Farms and Healthy Schools pilot program served more than 48,600 healthy snacks to Philadelphia area schools in its first year.

Senate Bill 1209 is part of the Farmers First Agenda, a comprehensive package of legislation to promote agriculture in Pennsylvania announced by Sen. Waugh and **Sen. Noah Wenger (R-Lancaster)** in 2005. The bill was sent to the House of Representatives for consideration.

SENATE VOTES TO BOOST PA FARMERS' MARKETS

THE SENATE approved legislation Sept. 25 to help make fresh, healthy food available in underserved communities, while supporting farmers and spin-off businesses.

House Bill 2472 would create a grant program designed to encourage the development and expansion of farmers' markets. The measure was approved by the Senate Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee, chaired by **Sen. Mike Waugh (R-York)**, in June. The bill authorizes the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture to establish standards and procedures to award grants for these purposes, with an emphasis placed on underserved areas.

Each applicant will be required to provide at least 10 percent of the grant amount in matching funds or in-kind goods or services. The amended bill was returned to the House of Representatives for consideration.

In the Spotlight

UNDER THE CURRENT PROGRAM, the state pays all or part of the premiums that physicians must pay into the Medical Care Availability and Reduction of Error (MCARE) fund. The fund helps pay toward the cost of the \$500,000 in MCARE fund coverage that the state requires each doctor to secure, in addition to the \$500,000 in primary coverage from the private marketplace. MCARE assistance is financed primarily by a 25-cent tax on cigarettes. *"The good news is that Pennsylvania's medical community is seeing improvements thanks to the comprehensive patient safety and tort reform provisions of Act 13 of 2002 and the MCARE abatement program. Medical malpractice premiums continue to be very high, but the program has helped to keep doctors in the state, and that was our primary goal,"* said Senator Rafferty.

Fast Facts

ADDITIONAL SLOTS LAW REFORMS IN SENATE BILL 862

- Makes suppliers optional by allowing a manufacturer to determine whether or not to use a supplier.
- Requires that if a PGCB member recuses himself from voting on a particular applicant, he must recuse himself from the entire proceeding.
- Strengthens the prohibition on "ex parte" or non-public communication by board members.
- Requires the PGCB budget to go through the normal state budget process.
- Eliminates the ability of a public official to place gambling-related assets in a blind trust.
- Prohibits PGCB members from being employed by a licensed entity for two years following the end of their term.
- Strengthens removal provisions for PGCB members. Adds additional types of offenses that lead to removal.
- Requires at least one public input hearing in the host municipality for future slot machine license applications.
- Requires that the central control computer system protects against fraud.

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