

NJ THIRD DISTRICT

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Newsletter

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NJ Pension and Health Benefits Reform Becomes Law

On June 28, Senate President Sweeney's landmark pension and health benefits reform legislation was signed into law by the Governor. The bipartisan legislation makes several much-needed reforms to the state pension and health benefits systems in an effort to ensure that promises made to New Jersey's public employees are kept.

"The governor's original proposals were too harsh. He asked that all public employees immediately pay 30 percent of health care costs and his pension reforms were unfair to the workers of this state. He was wrong," said Senator Sweeney while testifying on the legislation before the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee. "We could either oppose the governor outright or craft our own revolutionary and responsible reform. We need action. Reform is needed now. We have a pension system in crisis, one that is teetering on the brink of collapse. That is becoming clearer as we see record numbers of public employees retiring. What happens to those folks if we don't act now to save their pension? We have a commitment and responsibility to public employees to ensure the health and welfare of their pension."

The law – hailed as a possible model for states across the country – requires all employees to

contribute more into the pension systems, which currently are underfunded by billions of dollars and which actuaries have said could be go insolvent by as early as 2018. The law also will make state payments into the pension funds a contractual obligation, enforceable by the courts, ensuring that the governor and Legislature do not shirk their responsibilities.

This law also requires all public employees to begin greater sharing in the cost of their health care premiums. This premium sharing plan will be phased in over a four year period and will be determined by a sliding scale according to employee salary, so that those employees who make less will be required to pay a smaller percentage of the cost of their premiums. Also, newly constituted worker -employer joint boards will create new health care plans for employees, ensuring greater choices for workers in choosing their health care. Current retirees are unaffected by the changes.

The measure passed the Senate by a vote of 24-15 and passed the General Assembly by a 46-32 count. Information on this legislation, including a comparison to proposals that had previously been put forward can be found at www.njbenefitreform.com.

Governor's Vetoes Hurt Most Vulnerable Residents



In June, the Democratic legislature presented Governor Christie with a budget that would have helped the middle class, municipalities, seniors, college students, and the disabled to name a few.

The Democratic budget would have restored the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and the NJ Family Care programs. In Fiscal Year 2011, the income eligibility for NJ

Family Care was reduced by Governor Christie from \$36,000 to \$25,000 for a family of three. Governor Christie's proposal for Fiscal Year 2012 would have further reduced the income eligibility to approximately \$5,200 for a family of three.

Other restorations that the Democratic budget provided for was assistance to seniors and people with disabilities in the form of:

- Payments for prescription drugs
- Payments for home health care

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New State Budget Delivers Devastating Cuts to Numerous Programs

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- Funding for Medical Assistance recipients in nursing homes and the elimination of co-pays for medical day care

Governor Christie, using his line-item veto power dramatically purged most aid in every category, in every constituency in New Jersey, from the proposed Democratic budget.

Municipalities will see transitional aid cut from \$139 million down to \$10 million dollars. Transitional aid helps towns through extraordinary financial hardships by providing direct property tax relief for residents. Bridgeton, Penns Grove, and Salem City have benefitted from the program.

Senate President Steve Sweeney was very vocal regarding his displeasure with the Governor's choices in the line-item vetoes.

"These cuts hurt people, the most vulnerable people," said Senate President Sweeney.

Another casualty of the Governor's budget cuts was Family Planning Services, whose funding was eliminated. Nursing homes will see a drastic \$25 million cut. Funding for grants to Hispanic Women's Resource Centers, non-

public technology aid, clinical legal services for the poor, services for the blind and visually impaired, tuition aid grants, and other programs in New Jersey were subject to line-item vetoes.

The budget also would have fully funded all Third District schools. However, the governor's line-item veto and veto of the millionaire's tax cut roughly \$23.5 million from local schools.

"I was hopeful that our budget would bring about relief to our citizens," said Deputy Speaker John J. Burzichelli. "However, the Governor saw things differently."

Historical sites such as the Battleship New Jersey, Old Barracks in Trenton, and the Newark Museum all suffered the same line-item veto fate. With funding completely eradicated from the Fiscal Year 2012 state budget, the destiny of these locations is now in serious jeopardy.

"We understand that times are tough in this economy," said Assemblywoman Celeste M. Riley. "However it's not just our state that is in a fiscal crisis. Our



On July 11 and 12, Senate President Sweeney led his colleagues in efforts to override many of the Governor's line-item vetoes.

middle income and poorest residents are barely hanging on."

The Senate held override votes on the line-item vetoes in two three hour sessions the following week, however, without three additional Republican votes these attempts failed. The Assembly Budget Committee plans to hold hearings over the summer on the impact of such program reductions. For instance, the loss of transitional aid to cities may cause serious public safety issues if police departments are cut by local governments.

Third District Legislators Fight to the Very End to Save NJN



bly by fifteen votes it failed to win approval in the Senate by one vote.

The resolution (ACR201) highlighted a number of concerns regarding the contract negotiated by the State Treasurer, including the lack of transparency and public input in the bidding and selection process. Most importantly is the loss of a New Jersey-centric entity solely devoted to covering important state issues. There were competing proposals to operate the state's

broadcasting system within New Jersey that would have maintained the same level of state coverage afforded by NJN.

"Forty years ago NJN was created to fill a void for New Jerseyans who are left to depend on Philadelphia and New York for our media news," said Assemblyman Burzichelli. "This deal sacri-

fices what we have most valued in the NJN news coverage and leaves New Jersey taxpayers still spending \$2 million a year to maintain the broadcast licenses and transmission towers."

Legislators also expressed concerns over a clause in the contract that would allow WNET to walk away from the agreement if it does not meet its financial target or the state could provide the funding necessary to keep WNET on board.

"I am disheartened to see the lights go out permanently at NJN. I believe this is a major loss for NJN's audience and for the entire state," said the Assemblyman. "This action will certainly leave our residents in the dark on critical New Jersey issues."

Recently, the Assembly passed a resolution, co-sponsored by Assemblyman John J. Burzichelli to reject a proposal by the Christie Administration to terminate the long esteemed NJN and move the broadcasting rights to New York public broadcasting system WNET. Though the measure passed the Assem-

Legislation Continues Preservation of Open Space and Farmland



Assemblywoman Celeste Riley and Assemblyman John Burzichelli were sponsors to several bills that release money for open space and farmland preservation. Together, Riley and Burzichelli sponsored five bills that appropriate funds from several programs, including the Green Acres, Blue Acres, and Farmland Preservation pro-

grams. The funds will be dispersed to local, state, and non-profit organizations for preservation and conservation purposes.

“This money that is being allocated is a direct result of New Jersey’s commitment to open space preservation,” said Assemblywoman Riley. “It is important for us as state representatives to be able to show our constituents how their ‘yes’ vote on the bond referendum in 2009 has been able to preserve our undeveloped land in the Third Legislative District.”

Specifically, the bills include \$4.5 million in planning incentive grants to Upper Deerfield in Cumberland County, Elk, Franklin, and Woolwich in Gloucester County, and Alloway, Pilesgrove, Pittsgrove, and Upper Pittsgrove in Salem County; \$5.9 million also would be distributed to non-profit organizations D & R Greenway Land Trust and the New Jersey Conservation Foundation, who will be working

with farm owners to preserve 12 farms throughout Salem and Gloucester counties.

“The allocation of the funds provides opportunity for several local, state, and non-profits, to continue the task of making sure New Jersey remains the Garden State,” said Assemblyman Burzichelli. “When residents shop at a local farm market or visit a Green Acres park they are experiencing the impact these programs have on our quality of life.”

The “2009 Farmland Preservation Fund” and “2009 Green Acres Fund” were established by a law sponsored by Assemblywoman Riley and Senator Sweeney. Voters approved the bond referendum in November of the same year.

“The referendum in 2009 and subsequent legislation that continues New Jersey’s commitment as a leader in the preservation of farmland and open space is crucial,” said Assemblywoman Riley. “As the most densely populated state in the nation, we have an immediate and pressing responsibility to protect what is available. As we work to create livable communities through a balance of preservation and economic growth, we are placing great value in the future of all New Jerseyans.”

All bills passed unanimously in both houses of the Legislature in June and are currently awaiting the Governor’s signature.

School District Aid Bill Progresses

Assemblywoman Sweeney is sponsoring to provide additional aid to school districts with significant enrollment growth was released from the Senate Education Committee on June 23. The bill would provide supplemental aid to districts that have experienced at least 13 percent enrollment growth over the past three years. Within the Third Legislative District, impacted school districts would include East Greenwich, Kingsway Regional, South Harrison, Swedesboro-Woolwich, and Elmer school districts.

“Especially in light of recent cuts in education for many school districts, it is important that we continue to assist those districts that have witnessed significant growth

in recent years,” said Senator Sweeney. “I will continue to work to ensure that all of New Jersey’s underfunded school districts receive the support that they deserve in order to continue to provide a quality education to our children.”

The bill (S2868) has been referred to the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee for further consideration. The bill’s Assembly counterpart (A3961), sponsored by Assemblyman John Burzichelli and Assemblywoman Celeste Riley, is currently pending before the Assembly Education Committee.

“Adequate funding for our public schools is a necessity. It is an issue that the state must lead in helping school districts cope with strained budgets,” said Assemblywoman Riley.

Riley Sponsors Mold Housing Act

Legislation sponsored by Assemblywoman Riley would help New Jersey residents who have been exposed to toxic mold in their homes. The measure (A3773) would establish standards for exposure limits to mold in residential buildings, and procedures for the inspection, identification, and evaluation of the interior of residential buildings for mold.

“Mold can exacerbate health problems including asthma and allergies in children, and currently there are no standards to control its harmful potential,” said Assemblywoman Riley. “Other states have passed laws establishing guidelines, and now it’s time for New Jersey to fol-

low suit and protect its residents against the health risks that can be caused by mold.”

A second bill would establish the “Mold Safe Housing Act,” creating mechanisms for tenants living in mold-contaminated rental housing to have the mold effectively removed, or be relocated to safer rental housing. In addition, the bill provides a system of inspection of all rental housing for the presence of mold. The bill provides that a prospective home purchaser can specify that an inspection for the presence of mold be performed by a licensed home inspector, should the potential buyer retain an inspector.

Shared Municipal Services Legislation Advanced by Committee



Legislation introduced by Senate President Sweeney to help control property taxes in New Jersey through the utilization of shared municipal services was released from the Senate Community and Urban Affairs Committee on June 13, 2011. The bill seeks to encourage greater sharing of services by local government units.

“Sharing services is a great way to provide more efficient government while at the same time creating savings for taxpayers,” said Senator Sweeney. “Towns can share services with each other while not losing their individual identity or the uniqueness of their communities. Given the current economic climate, it is clear that sharing services is an idea whose time has come.”

The bill would charge the state’s current Local Unit Alignment, Reorganization, and Consolidation Commission (LUARCC) – created in 2007 to examine ways to make local government more efficient – with determining where taxpayer money could be saved through the sharing of services. If LUARCC determines that a savings can be realized through sharing that service in one or more local governments, the question of whether to do so would be put to a public referendum in all municipalities involved. If the towns involved fail to pass the referendum or refuse to implement the service-sharing plan within 14 months, they would be subject to losing state aid in the amount equal to what they would have saved had they shared the service.

If one town approves it but another denies it, only the town that denied it would lose aid.

“The taxpayers of New Jersey should not have to foot the bill for those government entities that do not wish to run more cost-effectively,” said the Senator. “The property tax burden on New Jerseyans has become too much. It is time we start providing the necessary incentives to get us moving on shared services. Simply put, if a town can save money through sharing services and decides not to do so, they are going to lose out on state aid.”

After being released from the Senate Community and Urban Affairs Committee, the bill now heads to the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee. Its counterpart in the Assembly is currently pending before the Assembly Housing and Local Government Committee.

District Spotlight: Redistricting Changes Composition of District

Following the results of the decennial census, as mandated by the New Jersey Constitution, the boundaries of the state’s 40 legislative districts were recently redrawn. The purpose of redistricting is to ensure that each district is equal in population, so to achieve the “one person – one vote” principle.

Before the redrawing the Third Legislative District comprised of 40 municipalities making it the largest of the state’s districts in geographic size. The newly redrawn district is more compact in land size and covers 33 townships. It includes only 3 of the 11

original towns in Cumberland County. In Gloucester County the district lost the towns of Harrison, Mantua, and Wenonah and gained Franklin, Glassboro, Newfield, and Woodbury Heights. All of Salem County will continue to be included in the Third District.

In November, voters will elect their one State Senator and two Assembly members according to these new lines, with the official transition occurring in January 2012 when the 215th Legislature is sworn into office.



Above map illustrates the new borders of the Third Legislative District.

Constituent Resource Corner: New Mortgage Assistance Program

New Jersey HomeKeeper is a new federally funded program that assists individuals in danger of losing their home due to unemployment or under-employment.

The program provides assistance in the form of a 0% interest rate, deferred payment second mortgage loan. The loan proceeds may be used to cover arrearages and/or a portion of the homeowner’s monthly mortgage payment, including property taxes, property in-

surance, and mortgage insurance. Qualified homeowners may be eligible for up to \$48,000 in assistance for a period of up to 24 months.

For more information please visit the NJ HomeKeeper Program website at www.NJHomeKeeper.gov. Residents who find themselves ineligible for the NJ HomeKeeper Program are encouraged to visit the New Jersey Housing and Mortgage Agency website, www.state.nj.us/dca/hmfa.

“Unfortunately, many hardworking, responsible residents have seen their job or salary become a casualty of the economic recession,” said Assemblywoman Riley. “While the economy has shown some signs of recent improvement, many residents of our district are still feeling the effects of the recession. If eligible for the loan, residents could have up to two years of assistance to search for a new job, and bring a new sense of security to their lives.”