

Meeting with State Representative Thomas Mehaffie, November 9, 2017

Back on July 18, we met with State Senator John DiSanto. He expressed disillusionment with the budget process. He was frustrated by the fact that the Republican-dominated General Assembly passed a \$34 billion spending bill without adequate revenue. It took many more months to pass a revenue bill to fill a \$2.3 billion hole, and the budget was once again late. And the revenue bill plugs that hole by expanding gambling, and by borrowing against future revenue, both of which are unhealthy for our Commonwealth. PA has suffered five credit downgrades in the six years that Republicans have held the reigns in the General Assembly, which is not your fault since you're in your first year in office. We clearly have a broken-down budget process in Harrisburg. What are your thoughts about the budget process in general? And specifically, you voted against the final revenue bill, HB 542, which passed on a bipartisan basis and was supported by Republican leadership. Why did you oppose that bill, and what, if anything, can you do to help improve the budget process next year?

Our first question to him dealt with the budget process in general and, specifically, the final revenue bill, HB 542, which was passed on a bipartisan basis. Representative Mehaffie opposed this bill. His reasoning was that they passed an expenditure bill before the revenue bill and that was not the right way to do it. Also, he is against all types of gaming, although he notes that revenue from Hollywood Casino does help fund 911 responders. Representative Mehaffie does not like the use of "one-time fixes," and he noted that the state had a \$1.5 billion dollar shortfall. The state, he said, wanted to cut corrections and human services, including defunding mental hospitals and Medicaid, which he said is wrong. It would be left to the county to make up the difference.

PA is the only Marcellus Shale state that does not impose a natural gas extraction tax, despite the fact that PA continues to run into problems coming up with revenue to fund the budget. You recently voted against a shale extraction tax. Why? And are there circumstances in which you would support a shale extraction tax?

When queried about the Marcellus Shale extraction tax, Representative Mehaffie said he voted against it. He called it a "discharge resolution," and he stated that he was informed that if he voted for the resolution, "the shale tax would die."

He noted, rather unhappily, that the bill had 320 amendments attached to it.

A referendum passed this week that represents the first step toward eliminating property taxes in PA. Currently, property taxes serve as the primary and only stable funding source for local school districts. In addition to losing stability, eliminating property taxes will also lead to a loss in local control for future funding that may be required for maintenance, renovations, and expansions. What are your thoughts on eliminating property taxes? If in favor, how do you propose to make up the difference, and what effect do you think it will have on public schools?

The referendum to eliminate property taxes in PA passed recently. Currently, these taxes provide stable funding for local school districts. Representative Mehaffie was asked about his thoughts on this. He stated that he is a strong supporter of public education. Charter and cyber schools, he pointed out, do not have to meet the same standards as public schools and he feels this is wrong. Currently, he is co-sponsoring a bill that will support pre-K education, which he feels is a great investment in our schools. He will not vote for Bill #76 (the charter school bill).

Effective leaders demonstrate courage and consideration, often despite intense pressure by special interests such as the NRA. Here are some sobering numbers for Pennsylvania, from the Center for American Progress, covering gun deaths from 2005 to 2014:

- * 13,781 killed, which averages 1,531 per year. That's more than the number of PA residents killed in car accidents each year. And it's two-and-a-half times the number of US soldiers killed in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars combined.

- * in 2015, 113 women were murdered by a domestic partner

- * In 2015, Pennsylvania received a "C" rating from the Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence. Among the reasons for the "C" were the poor background checks for long guns and the ease of access to guns by domestic abusers.

- * Pennsylvania is a top supplier of crime guns recovered in other states.

- * Law enforcement officers are killed at a high rate in Pennsylvania, with one killed every six months and one assaulted every two days.

What will it take for you to support common-sense gun legislation, such as closing the boyfriend loophole and requiring those convicted of domestic violence to surrender their weapons and ammunition to law enforcement?

As the Center for American Progress notes, from 2005 to 2014, there were 13,781 gun deaths in Pennsylvania. That figure is two-and-a-half times the number of US soldiers killed in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars combined. Also, Pennsylvania is a top supplier of crime guns recovered in other states. We asked the representative what it would take for him to support common-sense gun legislation, such as requiring those convicted of domestic violence to surrender their weapons and ammunition to law enforcement. He said that he is an NRA supporter. As far as the above questions, he replied, "I don't have an answer about it."

Two municipal authorities in your district, Middletown Borough and Derry Township, recently voted by a combined 9 yes, 0 no, and 1 abstention, to support a resolution calling for a nonpartisan citizens commission to draw Congressional and legislative district boundaries after the 2020 census. This would end the extreme partisan gerrymandering that continues to plague PA politics. Like many of your Republican House colleagues, will you consider co-sponsoring HB 722, which would amend the constitution to create a nonpartisan redistricting committee? And if not, why not? And who should draw district boundaries: self-interested party leaders or a nonpartisan citizen's commission?

Both Middletown Borough and Derry Township recently voted yes on a resolution to have a nonpartisan citizen's commission

Although he said he thinks the drawing of districts should be "more localized," he stated that he would not support the bill as it is written. He further stated that he talks to Representative Samuelson on a regular basis. He also thinks there needs to be representation from every county on an independent commission.

Are you willing to publicly request on a regular basis that the House leadership conduct hearings on HB 722, which was introduced in May? At this time there are 98 co-sponsors, just 4 short of a majority to pass legislation.

What do you see as the future of healthcare in PA? What will become of Medicare, Medicaid, and the Child Health Insurance Program, or CHIP?

Regarding Healthcare: Medicare, Medicaid, and Child Health Insurance Program (CHIP), Representative Mehaffie criticized the Affordable Care Act (ACA) for charging a fine that is cheaper than a premium. He informed us that as a representative, he visits the Hershey Medical Center regularly. He is very concerned about rising healthcare costs. Importantly, he explained that the UPMC/Pinnacle Health merger could push the Hershey Medical Center out of business. In his concern about this, he has spoken to the Attorney General about this upsetting possibility.

What is your stance on CHIP covering gender reassignment surgery? It is a minimal cost in the grand scheme of the program. House Republicans are holding the bill hostage over the inclusion of Gender reassignment coverage. If the bill isn't passed before December 31st the program will lapse, and an estimated 176,000 children will be without health care. Are you willing to delay coverage to nearly 200,000 children over this?

We asked the representative about CHIP covering gender reassignment surgery. It was noted that House Republicans are holding the bill hostage over this issue. If not passed by December 31st, the program lapses and approximately 176,000 children will be without healthcare. "I have no problem with transgender children being included in CHIP," he answered. He said that he is practical and cannot put everyone in harm's way due to ideology. Speaking personally, he said that he has a gay uncle, so he doesn't discriminate. Representative Mehaffie added that we need to have more moderate people elected.

After a heavy rainfall event this summer, a Middletown business owner said the 4 feet of water marked the 5th time in 10 years that he had destructive flooding. The paved trail along Bullfrog Valley Road in Derry Township was ripped to pieces and is now being rebuilt for the second time in just six years. The undeniable fact is that intense damaging rainfall events are happening more frequently as the atmosphere warms. What role do you see for the General Assembly in working toward the necessary reduction in greenhouse gas emissions in PA so our residents can be spared the destructive impacts of climate change?

Representative Mehaffie noted that he had voted against a bill to allow magnesium runoff from mines. Following this, he spoke strongly about what he feels is the need for the continued use of nuclear power.

Planned Parenthood provides essential and irreplaceable health services such as cancer screenings, pap tests, and HIV tests for tens of thousands of Pennsylvania women. A recent study by Texas A&M University shows that abortions in Texas increased after Texas defunded PP. In the first three years after Texas Republicans slashed the family planning budget in 2011 and shut down more than 80 women's health clinics, the abortion rate among teenagers in the state rose 3% over what it would have been had the clinics remained open. Teenage pregnancy also increased by 3%. The same thing will probably

happen here if the General Assembly cuts off funding. How will you vote on any bill that calls for eliminating state funding for Planned Parenthood?

He replied that he is supportive of Planned Parenthood, but thinks it needs a name change to get out from the current stigma. However, he remarked that pro choice does not necessarily mean pro abortion, and that abortion should not be used as contraception. He said, "We can't cut things that are helping out people." Rep. Mehaffie added that in college he helped a friend get to plan parenthood to use their services.

Do you support HB153, the Pennsylvania Size of Legislature Reduction Amendment, which would reduce the size of the House from 203 to 151 members and save taxpayers \$10 to \$15 million per year? And when is HB153 expected to come up for a vote in this session?

He pointed out several problems with it. First, he remarked that he finds his staff to be crucial to doing a good job. Second, the representatives will become less accessible. He also thinks Congressmen should have longer terms, as he is gearing up for re-election soon.

What are you doing to prevent the closure of Three Mile Island, and if the closure cannot be prevented, do you have any plans to soften the blow of losing 300+ high-paying jobs and millions of dollars in real estate taxes?

He emphasized that TMI has 675 employees and there is a possibility of losing 300 jobs there. He said that it was largely on the industry to figure out a way to stay competitive as nuclear facilities all over are having trouble.