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CONTACT:
Erik Arneson
earneson@pasen.gov
(717) 787-4712

Public's Call for Reform Heard Loud and Clear by Pennsylvania Senate Republicans

by Senate Majority Leader Dominic Pileggi (R-Chester)

Last year, the citizens of Pennsylvania delivered a strong message to Harrisburg. They want state government to be more open, more accessible, and more accountable. The state Senate's Republican caucus heard that message loud and clear, and we have responded – and will continue to respond – in meaningful ways.

Senate Republicans are committed to promoting government integrity and better involving the public in the legislative process. Already, working in a bi-partisan manner, we've enacted a set of strong new Senate operating rules. Improvements over the old rules include:

- Restricting Senate sessions to between 8 a.m. and 11 p.m., eliminating middle-of-the-night votes.
- Posting amendments to the Internet before they can be offered on the Senate floor.
- Waiting at least six hours before voting on an amended bill or a conference committee report. In most cases, this means an amended bill won't be voted on until the next day.
- Posting Senate floor votes on the Internet as soon as possible, always within 24 hours.
- Posting committee votes within 48 hours.
- Posting the Senate's *Legislative Journal* – which includes the full text of all floor debates – within 45 days after the date of the session.
- Eliminating private car leases for senators.
- Prohibiting members who live within 50 miles of the Capitol from collecting per diems.

In addition, last year, we implemented a co-pay for health insurance for Senators and staff.

We believe that's an impressive start, but it is only the beginning. By May, we will unveil a system to make it easy for citizens to use the Web to submit comments for all committee

meetings and public hearings, as well as to provide comments on specific bills. And by September, we will provide video and audio feeds of Senate floor action on the Internet.

Those are relatively basic steps that will make it easier for the public to see what their senators are doing and to participate in the legislative process. More importantly, they are signs of the direction and energy level of our caucus.

We also intend to address more challenging reforms.

I'm sponsoring legislation to include the legislature's financial records under Pennsylvania's Open Records Law, sometimes referred to as the Right-to-Know Law.

This bill will dramatically strengthen the Open Records Law by covering the judiciary's financial records, the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency, and the state-related universities: Penn State, Temple, Pitt and Lincoln. The public deserves to know how their taxes are spent.

My Open Records legislation will also cut the time period for agency responses to requests for information in half, from 10 days to 5 days, and it will detail the procedure on how to request information under the Open Records Law – making it more user-friendly. Requests will be allowed by email.

Finally, the legislation will establish an Open Records Clearinghouse in state government to handle appeals when requests for information are denied. Under current law, such appeals are heard by the agency which just denied the request. A central agency designated for handling appeals will streamline the process and make decisions more predictable and understandable.

The members of the Senate Republican Caucus represent the diversity of Pennsylvania, but we're all dedicated to improving Pennsylvania. And while we will have differences with each other, with the other caucuses, and with the governor, those differences will be based on honest policy disagreements rather than political partisanship.

To solve the complex issues facing our state, we know that we need to work with the Governor, the other legislative caucuses, and also – most importantly – the citizens of Pennsylvania. The people are right to expect results from state government, and we must deliver.

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Senator Dominic F. Pileggi (R-Chester) is the Majority Leader in the Pennsylvania state Senate. He was first elected to the Senate in 2002.