

Under the Dome with DeAngelo

An Update on the New Jersey State Government by Assemblyman Wayne DeAngelo

On a daily basis, the actions of the State Legislature or Governor's Executive Branch under the State House Dome affect the day-to-day lives of residents from all corners of New Jersey. Here's brief overview of the recent hot topics and issues to help better inform residents of what to look for in state government.

On February 25, 2014, Governor Christie presented his annual budget address to the State Legislature to put forth his Fiscal Year 2015 spending plan. The proposal does not include a tax increase nor does it include the previously sought 10 percent income tax cut that the Governor attempted last year. Unfortunately, the budget proposal does not include new or specific proposals for job growth or economic development necessary to grow New Jersey's workforce and businesses. Additionally, aid to municipalities and school districts may likely remain flat, but those details are still forthcoming. An estimated \$331 million in energy receipts taxes collected from residents will continue to be diverted to the state coffers to the detriment of municipalities seeking to lower property taxes. This is an issue that my colleagues and I have and will continue to advocate against in order to bring relief to residents.

The Christie budget proposal does, however, include increased funding for Medicaid and FamilyCare; additional support to institutes of higher education; and a two percent increase intuition Aid Grants (TAG) for students. The proposal would provide Homestead Benefit of \$402 for all homeowners with income under an estimated \$75,000 and a benefit of \$516 for senior and disabled homeowners with income up to \$150,000.

A key aspect of the Governor's budget requires additional contributions by public employees to cover pension and health care costs. This would be in addition to the sweeping pension and benefits reforms enacted three years ago that forced public employees to pay more without utilizing the standard collective bargaining process. Given the volume of public employees in Mercer County, this proposal is of great significance to many families and will have a direct impact on them. While the Governor is proposing a significant payment to pension fund, the solvency of it remains in question because of years of under-funding. This issue will likely remain front and center in the budget deliberations.

Under the New Jersey State Constitution, a balanced budget must be passed and signed into law by the governor before June 30th of each year. During the coming four months, the Legislature will review the Governor's proposal and work together to craft an appropriate budget for Fiscal Year 2015.

In other action, the State Senate and General Assembly also have passed legislation that would allow adoptees full access to their long-form birth certificates and other information such as family medical history. The measure seeks to protect the privacy rights of birth parents by allowing them to file a contact preference form with the State Registrar indicating the level of contact that they would like to have with the child. Under current law, an adopted child must

seek a court order to obtain information about their adoption. A previous version of the measure was vetoed by Governor Christie last year but the bill sponsors are seeking his support and now await his action.

The General Assembly unanimously passed a bill -- that I am proud to sponsor -- that would require public institutions of higher education to waive or reimburse application or transcript fees for New Jersey residents who are veterans, members of the Armed Forces of the United States, Reservists, or New Jersey National Guard who accept admission to the institution. The Senate will now take up the bill where its identical companion already has begun to be considered. As the vice-chairman of the Assembly Military and Veterans Affairs Committee, I know that we need to help our servicemen and women pursue higher education so that they can seek the skills necessary for civilian employment. It is imperative that we make sure that the large number of veterans returning from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are supported in their efforts to re-integrate into civilian life and that we honor and respect the skills that they have learned while protecting our freedoms.

To help put New Jerseyans back to work, State Senate President Steve Sweeney will be pushing his "New Jobs for New Jersey Act" that would give businesses with under 100 employees a tax credit for hiring a new employee who has been out of work for more than one month. Mr. Sweeney also proposed a measure that will give priority placement in job training programs to individuals who have been unemployed long-term and have lost their benefits. The recently introduced measures will likely be core measures undertaken by both houses of the Legislature in the coming months.

There also have been some changes in a key state official recently. A new commissioner for the state Department of Education has been nominated – David Hespe – who served in this capacity under former Governor Christie Whitman. Mr. Hespe's extensive career in education includes serving as an interim and assistant superintendent of schools in Willingboro; a professor at Rowan University College of Education; and most recently serving as president and CEO of Burlington County College among other posts. His nomination as commissioner must be approved by the State Senate.

As the spring kicks into full-gear and the snow begins to melt, there will much more action to come in the coming month Under the Dome.

Editor's Note: Assemblyman Wayne DeAngelo (D-Hamilton) represents the 14th Legislative District which includes parts of Mercer and Middlesex counties. He can be reached at AsmDeAngelo@njleg.org; phone (609) 631-7501; Facebook: Assemblyman Wayne DeAngelo.