

Under the Dome with DeAngelo

*An Update on the New Jersey State Government by Assemblyman Wayne DeAngelo
(August 2015)*

The physical hustle-and-bustle Under the Dome may have slowed during August, but there has been significant action taken on several public policy initiatives affecting people in all corners of our state.

As mentioned in last month's column, proposals passed by the Legislature to address problems with the state public employee pension system were put before the Governor for consideration. One bill would put an additional \$300 million into the pension system to address the unfunded liability. Another would call for quarterly payments to the pension system in order to ensure that the liability is slowly reduced. The bill would have generated an estimated \$100 million in additional investment.

Unfortunately, both bills were vetoed by Governor Christie. While a pension payment was made, the long-term shortfall structural debt and liability remains an must-address issue for the Legislature and the Governor to handle. Those who have paid into the system should not be bearing the full responsibility for its financial stability while the State falls short in its duty to pay a fair share.

Given the time of year when families are preparing for the start to the school year, let's focus on a few new laws that affect our students and classrooms.

First, a new law that would allow high school students to take sign language to fulfill their foreign language requirement needed for graduation. American Sign Language would be considered the equivalent of spoken languages such as Spanish, French, German, etc.. It has been 20 years since the effort to permit sign language to deem sign language acceptable for high school credit completion.

An act directing the Department of Education to conduct a study to consider the benefits, problems and options with potentially instituting later school start time in middle school and high school. Some research indicated that later school times could improve academic performance and links early school start times to lack of sleep.

A report by the American Academy of Pediatrics found that teenagers biologically have a difficult time falling asleep before 11 pm and waking before 8 am which in turn can make it difficult for students to perform in school at early hours. It recommends shifting school start times to 8:30 am or later. The study also links lack of sleep to health problems such as obesity, depression or mental health issues as well as a higher rate of accidents caused by drowsy students driving. More than 1,000 schools across the country have already moved back start times and have seen improvements in students.

When completed, the study would need to recommend to the Governor and Legislature whether or not changing school start times are feasible. In addition, the study would provide

recommendations on potential school districts that would be willing to participate in a pilot program.

To help college students working through their recovery from substance abuse, a new law now will create substance-free housing on college campuses. Under the law, four-year public institutions of higher education -- with at least 25 percent of the undergraduates living on campus -- will need to establish a substance abuse recovery housing program. As such, the college or university will have four years to develop the program that will include services such as on-site counseling, mentoring and peer support. A floor, wing area or an entire dormitory could be designated as substance-free housing. The intent of the law is to provide assistance to students seeking a substance-free living environment and recovery services as they strive toward academic success.

While these three measures are among the new laws, there are a few proposals that have been put forth over the summer. For instance, I recent bill that I introduced, Assembly Bill 4625 (A-4625) would establish uniform rates for water and sewer services for residential use based exclusively on metered consumption. Under the bill, residential water and sewer consumers who use municipal services (as opposed to private providers) would no longer be paying "flat fees" on their bills. Consumer bills would be based largely upon actual "metered consumption" or "usage" that will make bills lower for some.

For example, a widow who has a two bedroom apartment bill (with only her children or grandchildren visiting occasionally) often pays the same water fees as another family with 2 parents and 2 kids in the same size apartment year-round. Use of consumption for billing purposes is how private water companies -- such as Aqua Water; New Jersey American Water; United Water, etc. -- charge their customers. The rates for these companies are regulated by the state Board of Public Utilities. The rates for customers served by County or Municipal Utility Authorities are not regulated in the same manner.

By having metered be the method of fees for all residents, regardless of who is their provider, we are putting all residents on a level playing field. The bill would put water and sewer rates on the same kind of footing as electric or telephone service in our state. Bills that reflect consumption or usage also will encourage conservation for those who do not realize how much water they may be wasting. If you look at states with droughts, you can see how important conservation is for our communities. When the prices that residents pay are flat fees for their water and/or sewer use don't give them a sense of how much they are actually using - or more importantly - how much water they are wasting by leaving faucets running or unnecessary use. When the General Assembly returns in the late fall, I will be working to garner support for this measure.

I wish all the student, teachers, parents, and faculty a great start to the school year! May it be educational, prosperous and filled with great memories! I will see you all back here next 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; www.WayneDeAngelo.com; Facebook: Assemblyman Wayne DeAngelo; or Twitter: @DeAngeloLD14.