

Under the Dome with DeAngelo

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

Happy New Year to your families! With 2015 starting to gear up in small businesses, industries and homes across the state, state officials Under the Dome also are taking note of impactful issues affecting residents in the coming year.

First, let's review of a few new laws that have gone into effect for the New Year.

After having been approved by the majority of voters, the minimum wage has now risen automatically to \$8.38 per hour. The minimum wage increased in 2013 -- as a result of voter approval of a ballot question -- from \$7.25 to \$8.25 for the first time since 2005. Under the new law, on January 1 of each year the rate will increase in keeping with the Consumer Price Index and inflation. In years of deflation, the rate will not increase. While the increase in the minimum wage is a step in the right direction for working families, we need to continue to push for the creation of good-paying jobs that provide a true living wage to ensure that families do not fall into poverty.

In March, a new law will take effect requiring that police vehicles are equipped with cameras to be used primarily for traffic stops to utilize a "mobile recording system." This system will help ensure that the events of a motor vehicle stop are recorded to prevent any false statements made in an arrest or conflict that arises from the stop. In addition, this law will not only protect law enforcement officers who put their lives at risk daily by creating a visual account of the incident but it will prevent ambiguity regarding what happened during an encounter. There is subsequent legislation pending that would require body cameras on police officers to further these protective efforts.

Beginning in August, birth parents who give their children up for adoption will be able to file a contact preference form with the State Registrar indicating the level of contact that they would like to have with the child. Contact levels will vary from direct contact to contact through an intermediary to no contact. Birth parents are encouraged to update family history once every ten years up until age 40 and then once every five years thereafter to ensure that adoptees have access to medical information. This change will come about under the adoption reform law that began to take effect several months ago after nearly 34 years of lobbying for open records by adoption rights advocates.

The pilot program enabling the use of "red light cameras" ended before the New Year. These cameras were placed at busy intersections throughout the state in towns that requested the use of the cameras to facilitate traffic management. The cameras were considered by opponents as a way to ticket motorists without a police presence, but supporters and local officials believe that the cameras have helped to deter drivers from "running" red lights which is a safety benefit. The issue will carry over into 2015 as some legislators and supporters are looking for a permanent renewal of the program.

Several issues also will be tackled by the State Legislature and Government in the coming year.

Seven cities across New Jersey such as Newark and Jersey City passed local ordinances in 2014 that would allow for the implementation of sick leave policies for businesses operating in those cities. A similar sick leave mandate will go into effect in Trenton in March. Some lawmakers are pushing for a statewide law that would allow workers to earn one hour of sick time for every 30 hours worked. Opponents have state that this would create a burden of them to ensure proper staffing levels and keep their prices down in order to pay salaries for those individuals who may need to work extra time while a co-worker is out on sick time. There still is great debate in the Legislature regarding how to balance the ability for working individuals to take needed sick time without overburdening small businesses. If a statewide law is passed, New Jersey would be the second state in the nation to have such a mandate. Discussion of this measure will carry into the New Year.

In the final months of 2014, hearings were held across the state by legislative committees to consider ways in which to secure permanent funding for the Transportation Trust Fund (TTF). The funds receives about \$1.2 billion annually from constitutionally dedicates fuel and sales tax revenues. That is equal to the debt service of the TTF which has increased steadily since it's creation in 1984. Last year alone, the TTF provided \$284 million in aid to counties and municipalities for road improvements. This aid will be unsustainable, however, if additional financial resources are not identified to cover the costs. We need to find ways to fund road repair and construction projects without overburdening New Jersey motorists.

The Board of Public Utilities (BPU) must decided if they agree with a recent decision handed down by an Administrative Law Judge urging that rates for Jersey Central Power and Light (JCP & L) customers be reduced by \$107.5 million dollars. If the BPU does agreed with the decision, JCP&L customers would reap the financial benefits. This rate reduction case has been pending for approximately three years. I am hopeful that BPU will enact a rate reduction in order to provide much-needed rate relief to customers.

Of course, the one issue that will impact the governor's office, State Legislature, and the State as a whole, is the anticipated decision by Governor Christie regarding whether or not he intends to run for President. That one decision alone could very well impact how fast legislation may be signed into law once; legislative and administrative policy proposals; and whether or not Lieutenant Governor is in the role of Acting Governor.

One thing is for certain, the year 2015 will certainly be a very active year in New Jersey and 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.org or Facebook: Assemblyman Wayne DeAngelo.*