

## **Under the Dome with DeAngelo**

*An Update on the New Jersey State Government by Assemblyman Wayne DeAngelo  
(Nov 2014)*

Welcome back Under the Dome where the work of the State Legislature and Executive keeps going even after the sun goes down earlier in the evening.

Recently, elected officials at all levels across the state commemorated the two year anniversary of Superstorm Sandy which I am sure each of us remembers vividly as one of the most devastating natural disasters to strike our country. While the vast majority of New Jerseyans have returned to their individual sense of normal before the storm, many families that were directly hit are still not back in their homes and some businesses are not likely to ever return.

Many of us who visited the Jersey Shore this summer may have noticed areas that still are recovering and did not profit from the annual tourist season. Critics of the Christie Administration's recovery efforts note that New Jersey received \$3.3 billion in federal community block grants, yet only \$535 million has been distributed to municipalities, homeowners and renters. Clearly, more needs to be done to finish the recovery from Sandy to close this chapter in the lives of residents.

When Sandy hit, we directly saw the need to ensure that our utility services are able to handle disasters and, if we lose service, there is a critical need to get our electric, gas and water systems up and running as quickly as possible. Many residents were left in the cold and dark wondering when the power would come back before medications would expire or food would go bad. It has been two years. However, we have a long way to go to address problems that we saw that slowed powering our homes back up - such as sub-stations in flood plains; overgrowth of trees that brought power lines down; or simple communication from utility companies to customers.

Having been appointed at the new chairman of the Assembly Telecommunications and Utilities Associations Committee, I intend to tackle this issue which directly correlates to our residents having reliable and affordable utility services as well as greener energy sources. Companies who provide telecommunications and utilities services in our state have a responsibility to their consumers to make the investment necessary in their infrastructure to provide the services with minimal interruption or passing the cost onto customers. .

I also intend to focus on legislation that comes from recommendations of the community. Telecommunications and Utilities are part of everyday life in every household. When the house is warm and the power is on, we may take for granted how that service is delivered or the cost of that service. But, for many residents, keeping the lights on is a monthly struggle. My office constantly works with low-income residents applying for rescue programs when the bills are too high or they are threatened with termination. We need to make sure that, as we seek to drive down prices, these necessary programs are funded to help those facing a crisis.

As chairman, I also know that there are many ideas out there that we, as legislators, may not come up with. That is why I regularly listen to the ideas and concerns of my constituents.

Sometimes those ideas cannot be addressed by state government or the Legislature -- and sometimes those simple ideas can turn into worthwhile pieces of legislation.

Recently, for example, a constituent who leaves home during the winter months came to talk with me regarding his telephone bill. Like many seniors, he lives on a fixed income and paying his phone bill for those months when he is visiting family, is a financial nuisance and the cost racks up year after year. He had one simple suggestion: change the state law to allow for his phone line to be suspended for up to 6 months – as opposed to the current allowable term of 3 months – while being able to maintain his phone number. This way he is not changing his number every year if he is gone for more than three months and he's not paying for a phone service that he is not using.

While this individual may be out-of-state for family reasons, this bill also would help those who may be convalescing in a rehab facility or helping other family members or friends and gone from home for a while. It's a simple, common-sense bill that can save hundreds of dollars a year that can be put to other use.

In another instance, a group of residents in a senior citizen community formed a solar energy interest group. Members of the group came to me because they wanted to have the legal ability to put solar panels on their single-family homes and maintain the panels themselves. The group was interested in using solar energy to lower their energy bills in the long-term.

Because of current law, their association believed that it would not be possible for residents to put these panels up even if they were not on connected homes or public areas. But, they believed that they should be able to take some independent steps to lower their energy bills so I am still working to move this measure through the Legislature and hope to gain the support from my colleagues.

I welcome the input from consumers on telecommunications or utility issues that impact you every day. As always, I am willing to consider and issue and determine if there is a way for the Legislature to tackle the issues affects consumers daily.

On a final note, as many motorists hit the road to travel for Thanksgiving, they will notice the newly widened lanes on the New Jersey Turnpike between exits 9 and 6 in order to loosen the highway's bottleneck that often causes miles of traffic. The widening project that began in 2009 as the largest project in the 63-year history of the Turnpike was complete in time and \$200 under budget. Whether traveling to grandma's house for the holidays or just back on the road for the daily commute, this large-scale project will directly benefit New Jerseyans for decades to come.

I wish everyone a very Happy Thanksgiving to you and your families, and I hope to see you back here Under the Dome next month.

***Editor's Note:*** Assemblyman Wayne DeAngelo (D-Hamilton) represents the 14<sup>th</sup> Legislative District which includes parts of Mercer and Middlesex counties. He can be reached at [AsmDeAngelo@njleg.org](mailto:AsmDeAngelo@njleg.org); phone (609) 631-7501; [www.WayneDeAngelo.org](http://www.WayneDeAngelo.org) or Facebook: Assemblyman Wayne DeAngelo.