

Under the Dome with DeAngelo

*An Update on the New Jersey State Government by Assemblyman Wayne DeAngelo
(March 2016)*

Just as spring has sprung in our neighborhoods, so too has the Legislature sprung into action Under the Dome. Now in the beginning few months in the new, now current, Legislative Session, measures ranging from casino gaming to fighting poverty to pay equity and beyond have been at the core of measures under consideration.

The State Senate and General Assembly did agree, and pass, a measure that would put a question on the general election ballot in November to ask voters to consider allowing additional casinos to be built in New Jersey outside of Atlantic City. If passed, the ballot question would empower the State Legislature to pass laws with respect to the creation of these casinos. Because casino development is a part of the State Constitution, making changes to the establishment of them requires not only public support but then action by the Legislature to move forward if authorized by a majority of those who vote on a ballot question.

The ballot question proposal, however, does set forth some parameters for the potential new casinos. For instance, the proposal would call for two additional casinos in two different counties in northern New Jersey (at least 72 miles from Atlantic City.) These new casinos would be limited to be built by entities whose majority owners are current owners of New Jersey-based casinos. This requirement was a hard fought issue for the Building and Construction Trades to strive to ensure that the casinos are built by New Jersey's union workforce. A potential casino operator would be required to make a \$1 billion investment in New Jersey in acquisition, development and construction of the facility prior to it opening. This stipulation ensures that there is a significant commitment made by the developers to bring jobs and financial investment to our state.

Gambling revenues that come about from these new casinos would be dedicated between funding for programs for seniors citizens and the disabled as currently done with Atlantic City revenues. Provisions of the bill also sets forth ways to set-aside funding to revitalize and stabilize Atlantic City. Funds also would be dedicated to the standardbred and thoroughbred horsemen of the state who sustain businesses that are connected to the industry.

For years, we have seen Atlantic City - as a municipality and destination region - and the Atlantic City-based casinos struggle as a result of growing gambling venues in bordering states. While there was a slight uptick in revenues at the end of 2015, the numbers from January and February 2016 fell once again. The Division of Gaming Enforcement showed that the Atlantic City revenues for 2015 were \$2.56 billion - down by 6.5 percent since 2014. Furthermore, this revenue is less than half the revenue taken in nine years ago - \$5.2 billion - which was their best revenue level for a year.

While it is a tight-rope balancing act between protecting our Atlantic City casinos while creating gambling venues in northern New Jersey, it is critical that our State bring back those who have been frequenting out-of-state gaming facilities. It is important that we evolve the tourism draw of the New Jersey to that we regain the lost revenue that supports critical programs. Most

importantly, we need to protect the jobs in southern New Jersey while creating new building and construction jobs in building new casinos and permanent jobs at these sites and through businesses that also will benefit from related tourist activity.

With respect to wages not only at these casinos but in the general statewide workforce, a bill is now awaiting the Governor's action to strive to shrink the gender pay gap. The measure would expand the Law Against Discrimination (LAD) to make it unlawful for an employer to discriminate between employees based upon gender by paying a rate of compensation, including benefits, to employees of one gender that is less than the rate paid to the employees of another gender for substantially similar work that is taken as a composite of skill, effort and responsibility. Pay differentials would be allowed if they were based upon a merit system, skilled training, experience or education.

Research in 2013 found that median earnings for men in New Jersey was \$60,878 compared to our state's female workforce who have median earnings of \$47,878. Similarly, according to the Institute for Women's Policy Research study in 2014, an American woman earns 79 cents for every dollar earned by men. Over a female worker's lifetime this gap can rise to a wage difference of hundreds of thousands of dollars thereby greatly impact their economic stability.

Also in an effort to improve the economic stability of New Jerseyans, the Assembly Speaker has furthered a measure that would increase the New Jersey Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) to 40 percent of the federal level. This state EITC would supplement the federal credit for low-income workers. Those working families, with qualifying children, earning incomes of up to \$52,247 are eligible for the credit. Currently, New Jerseyans are eligible for a state EITC for 30 percent of the federal credit. The state Department of Treasury state that 552,900 taxpayers claimed this credit in 2014.

The Legal Services of New Jersey reports that more New Jerseyans are currently in poverty than in the past five decades. If the bill passes into law, eligible residents would receive an average EITC benefit of \$963 - an increase from \$708 from 2015. For low-income, working poor families, this additional \$255 would make a significant impact on families who may often all short of paying their annual household bills.

As a reminder to families of all income levels putting together their income tax filing, a new law that I wrote last year will allow for contributions to non-profit veterans organizations through their income taxes. The law created the Fund for Support of New Jersey Non-Profit Veterans Organizations that establishes annual grant programs created by these tax contributions to assist organization experiencing financial hardships. Organizations such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), the American Legion, and the Marine Corps League are eligible to obtain financial support. I urge you to support the great organizations that do so much for our veterans in our communities.

I will see you next month back here 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.