

Under the Dome with DeAngelo

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

The December hustle and bustle of getting ready for the holiday season extends this month to Under the Dome. While the State House is decked out in all of its traditional holiday decorations, lawmakers and state officials sprint through the halls in the final weeks of the current Legislature.

As I shared last month the current period of time before the new Legislature is sworn-in (on the second Tuesday of January) is called "Lame Duck." The legislative committees and full bodies of the Senate and Assembly have been actively meeting and voting on hundreds of measures in order to send them to the Governor's desk before January 11, 2015 when the session ends.

At the core of these bills are four measures pending before the Legislature this "Lame Duck" that will possibly end up on the ballot for the residents of New Jersey to vote on in November 2016. The four individual bills - that would each amend the State's constitution - would tackle some of New Jersey's most critical issues.

The first measure, Assembly Concurrent Resolution 1 (ACR-1), would ask voters to support an increase in funding to be permanently dedicated to transportation infrastructure. Under the proposal, voters would be asked through a ballot question to support an increase of 10.5 cents per gallon on gasoline sales and 13.5 cents per gallon on diesel fuel sales. Ten and a half cents per gallon of each would be dedicated to the Transportation Trust Fund (TTF) which is the primary mechanism for funding roadway construction and repair. Taxes on gross receipts of the sale of petroleum products also would be dedicated to the TTF. Should fuel taxes be increased in the future, the constitutional amendment would require that those increased amounts also be dedicated to the Fund.

New Jersey currently has second the lowest gas tax rate in the country (behind Alaska) at 32.90 cents per gallon. The national average is 48.88 cents per gallon.

Our state's transportation trust fund is expected to run on empty around June 2016. If we do not move forward with a reasonable approach to funding our road infrastructure, there will be no realistic mechanism for much-needed construction, repair and maintenance. We already are seeing decaying roads throughout our state so it is time to act.

Under another critical measure, Assembly Concurrent Resolution 3 (ACR-3) would similarly ask voters to approve a change the state constitution. Voters would be asked to change the law for the pension system for public employees to ensure that the State makes necessary payments into the system while not increasing the overall amount of the payment.

The State would be required to make its pension payment each year. Partial payments (that would increase in amounts) would increase annually and be made in quarterly installments on the first days of August, November, February and May. Full pension payments would be required as of July 1, 2021.

The New Jersey State Supreme Court ruled that a law passed in 2011 to require annual pension payments could not be upheld because of provisions in the state constitution. This amendment asks the public to support the obligation of the State to fulfill its responsibility by making the payments.

In addition, the amendment would provide public employees who began working for the state before May 21, 2010 a right to their pension benefits. In addition, employees who were hired after that date, but are vested after 10 years of service, would have the same right that could be enforceable in court. These provisions ensure that we are not balancing the pension system's financial problems on the backs of those public employees who have paid their fair share into it. I believe that it is a reasonable approach to finding a long-term solution to a problem that has plagued our state for years.

The third issue that will go before voters will be the consideration of allowing additional casinos to be built in New Jersey outside of Atlantic City. The proposals, however, are similar in allowing for up to two additional casinos in two additional counties in northern New Jersey. There were competing versions of the legislation that differed in how the additional revenue generated by these casinos will be divided. The overall intent is to split the additional gambling revenues between funding for programs for seniors citizens and the disabled (as currently done with Atlantic City revenues); funding to revitalize and stabilize Atlantic City that is struggling because of competition from bordering state's with gambling; and increasing funding dedicated to the in-state horse racing industry.

While the last couple months have seen slight upticks of revenue (ie. one percent in November), Atlantic City casinos have seen a pattern of revenue decreasing significantly in recent years because of the creation of gaming venues in Pennsylvania, Delaware and New York. These sites are pulling visitors from New Jersey as well as keeping residents in their respective states who previously frequented Atlantic City as the gaming hub of the region.

We need to find a way to bring those individuals back home and evolve the tourism draw of the Atlantic City region so that we can regain the lost revenue that supports critical programs. Moreover, the creation of new casinos in northern or central New Jersey also would create jobs not only at the casinos once they are open, but also would be critical jobs for the building and construction trades.

The final measure that could be before the public in November 2016, Assembly Concurrent Resolution 4 (ACR-4), would increase the membership and public participation in the Legislative Reapportionment Commission, commonly known as the "Redistricting Commission." Under the proposal, membership of the Commission would increase from membership from 10 to 13 with the independent appointee of the State Supreme Court involved at the beginning of the process, as opposed to (currently) at the end if parties become deadlocked. Equal political and ethnical and racial diversity would be taken into consideration in the appointees.

In addition, three public hearings would be required throughout the state with the final vote to be taken place at a public meeting. Furthermore, the commission would be prohibited from creating a redistricting plan that would create more than half of the legislative districts to favor

victories by either major political party. The Commission would be required to ensure that at the 25 percent of the districts created be considered "competitive" from a political standpoint.

While a census that would spur a legislative redistricting will not occur for another five years, this ballot questions looks toward the future to ensure more political fairness and competitiveness across our State. All too often, people grouse that "it doesn't matter" when it comes to elections because "the same people always win." By making sure that more legislative districts are competitive in nature and that the public has a say in how those districts are drawn, we can strive to make sure that every vote counts even more, in every corner of our state.

In closing, I personally want to wish you all a Merry Christmas and Holiday Season! I will see you back here Under the Dome next year in 2016!

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.