



Jil's Statehouse Report

News from Springfield from State Rep. Jil Tracy
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As we prepare to reconvene for the second year of the 95th General Assembly, it is important to recognize the significant accomplishments we achieved in 2007. I've tried not to be too partisan with this newsletter, but this year's summary cannot avoid the party feuding among the Democratic leadership of the Executive and Legislative branch. So here's how I saw it.

Despite failed Democratic leadership that has stymied negotiations and slowed progress on important issues, such as transit and capital, there is no doubt that we have made a positive impact on Illinois families, the education community, small business owners (as well as Illinois-based industries) and healthcare professionals. It is our lasting accomplishments that will make a difference to Illinois' economy and, more importantly, have a positive impact on our communities.

Record-Setting FY08 Education Budget

House Republicans were instrumental in negotiating a record-setting FY08 education budget. Our balanced approach to education funding earmarked over \$598 million to schools, which is the largest increase in Illinois history. Even with the Governor's veto, the budget increased education by \$544 million.

The final FY08 budget funds our education priorities by (1) boosting the General State Aid Foundation Level by \$400, (2) funding special education funding programs at 100% of the State's obligation, (3) increasing the special education Personnel Reimbursement program formula for the first time since 1985, and (4) increasing appropriations to major programs, such as the Early Childhood Block Grant, teacher mentoring programs, gifted education, and the Textbook Loan Program. We were also successful in negotiating a full pension payment to the Teachers' Retirement System.

Meaningful Advocacy for Veterans

Our proactive efforts on behalf of Illinois veterans have established the House Republican Caucus as the primary advocate for veterans in the General Assembly. Over the past five years, the Governor's commitment to assisting veterans has not been reflected in his budgets or in policies developed by the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

To offset the Administration's inattentiveness to the challenges facing veterans as they return from the "War on Terror," we convened the House Republican Veterans Task Force, which held nine hearings throughout Illinois in 2006. The task force heard testimony from veterans and veteran assistance organizations on issues ranging from employment protection to health care obstacles to housing shortages and education opportunities.

The result of these hearings framed a 2007 legislative package that: (1) blocked fund sweeps and charge backs from designated veteran/military funds; (2) created a veterans advocate outreach officer at the Department of Veterans' Affairs; (3) established a mental health pilot program for returning veterans; (4) protected veterans reemployment rights and State Veterans Preference provisions; and 5) required full funding annually of veteran education grants and scholarships.

Property Tax Relief for Seniors, Veterans, the Disabled, and Homeowners

The past session was significant for its long overdue property tax relief. Illinois veterans, seniors, the disabled and general homeowners were our focus from the start of the legislative session. House Republican insistence on widespread, statewide property tax relief ensured increased exemptions in the general homestead exemption and the senior citizen homestead exemption. New exemptions were created in the form of a disabled person, disabled veteran and returning veteran homestead exemption. Expanded availability of tax relief programs was also achieved for the senior citizen assessment freeze and circuit breaker programs through increases in income eligibility limitations. In addition, skyrocketing assessments for woodland properties were put in check with a two track program that preserves open space and protects current owners of woodland property from runaway assessed values.

Making Roads Safer for Our Teens

Our Caucus responded to the scourge of underage drinking and driving with enactment of new laws that seek to make the roads safer for teens and eliminate the tragedies that have gripped Illinois communities. Our passage of a law that gives authority to the Secretary of State to suspend a teenager's driver's license for a three month period if they are under court supervision for underage drinking provides an enforcement tool that will emphasize the ramifications of underage drinking. House Republican efforts also included an educational component that allows public schools to add the consequences of alcohol consumption and the operation of a motor vehicle to their safety education curriculum. The enactment of these laws demonstrates our pro-active agenda toward keeping our children safe.

Protecting Our Children Online

Everyday use of the internet by Illinois children was made more secure by House Republicans this year. The feedback received by the House Republican Internet Safety Task Force resulted in closure of a dangerous loophole that allowed sexual predators to have explicit online conversations with known minors without penalty. Our passage of the law made discussion of explicit sexual activity with a minor via the internet a felony.

Child pornography use in Illinois was also dealt a blow by House Republicans when we enacted a law permitting eavesdropping (with state's attorney permission) of suspected child pornography transmissions. Before our action, Illinois was one of the only states in the nation that did not allow such eavesdropping. An additional prohibition on internet communication with a minor was imposed on sex offenders. The action required that one of the conditions of a sex offenders' supervision or release include a prohibition on communication or contact with a minor who is not related to the offender. Safeguarding our children from online harm was a top House Republican priority.

House Republicans Push for Ethics Reforms

House Republicans took the high road and made a statement with passage of HB 1, which eliminated "pay-to-play" politics in Illinois. Aware of the unseemly correlation of campaign contributions made to the Governor by companies and individuals seeking business from the State, House Republicans fought to prohibit state contractors and bidders for state contracts over \$25,000 from contributing to the campaign committee of an executive officer who is responsible for awarding the contract.

Public confidence in government withers with growing appearances of inside dealing, and House Republicans fought to correct a flawed system. Regardless of the Senate's failure to address the issue, the push for reform will continue and House Republicans will demonstrate how we are the standard bearers of cleaner, more honest government.

Successfully Fighting Drug Use & Gangs

House Republicans recognized the plague of methamphetamine use in our communities by successfully enacting enhanced penalties for producers and creating additional meth-free zones. The growing trend of identity theft by methamphetamine producers and distributors prompted House Republicans to enhance penalties for persons who knowingly use or provide identification of another person in order to acquire a methamphetamine precursor. Additional methamphetamine-free zones were created for areas within 1,000 feet of a place of worship.

We also placed a spotlight on gang activity in both urban and rural areas of Illinois. A substantial package of anti-gang initiatives – many inspired by a report from the Chicago Crime Commission -- were introduced and subsequently enacted into law. The pro-active initiatives that became law included (1) permissive authority for school districts to provide gang resistance education, (2) enhanced penalties for drive-by shootings, and (3) increased penalties for identity theft used in the operations of an organized gang. Our insistence that communities be reclaimed for the residents resulted in these positive changes.

Pro-Environment & Pro-Illinois Coal

The decades-long House Republican commitment to assist and promote coal-rich southern Illinois was demonstrated by legislation that helped entice a \$1.5 billion dollar U.S. Department of Energy project Named FutureGen, the project is dedicated to constructing a near-zero emissions, coal-fired power plant. The highly-sought after project involved a fierce competition between Illinois and Texas for siting of the project. After long work drafting legislation that included indemnification guarantees, a streamlined permit process and over \$80 million in financial incentives, the FutureGen Alliance selected Illinois for the project.

House Republican hard work on the FutureGen legislation places Illinois on the international stage, as the pro-environment issue of renewable energy innovation will be headquartered downstate. The potential future impact on Illinois coal consumption is incalculable. The success of the FutureGen project exemplifies how our members are working for both today and tomorrow.

In short, I am confident that the numerous accomplishments we have achieved in the first session of the 95th General Assembly have had a significant, positive impact for all Illinoisans. We have not sat idle. We have fought for productive legislation that benefits our children, seniors, homeowners, families and business community. While more work awaits us, I am proud to discuss our accomplishments this past year.