

Fall 2024

State Representative JOHN LAWRENCE

Serving Chester County



Dear Neighbor,

It is an honor and very humbling to serve as your state representative in Harrisburg. I hope you find this newsletter to be informative about some of the important issues facing our community.

This newsletter includes updates on the status of Jennersville Hospital and the latest news regarding Big Elk Creek State Park. There is also information about this year's state budget, including some of the discussions that occurred during budget hearings earlier this year.

The past few years have brought a number of challenges, both locally and across the state. My office has received thousands of phone calls from folks unable to get through to various state offices, including PennDOT, Department of Revenue, and Department of Labor and Industry for unemployment compensation. We have been able to help many people cut through the red tape to get answers, but I am also trying to hold accountable the state officials responsible for these services.

Your thoughts and opinions on state government are very important to me. If you would like to discuss state-related issues in more detail, please do not hesitate to give me a call. You can reach me at the Jennersville office by dialing **610-869-1602**.

Thank you for the opportunity to serve you in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives.

Respectfully Yours,



**Bringing New
Health & Wellness
Services to You
in West Grove**



Scan the QR code for more information
and to sign up for the newsletter.

ChristianaCare West Grove Campus Update

A number of folks have asked me – what is going on at the old Jennersville Hospital? When is it going to reopen? What is going to happen there? Will there be an emergency room? With activity on-site picking up, I want to provide an update with the latest information.

As many will recall, Tower Health abruptly closed Jennersville Hospital, leaving our community without emergency medical care. Christiana Hospital, and Chester County Hospital are both 45 minutes from Jennersville – distance and time an individual suffering from a heart attack or other serious condition doesn't have. Since the closure, my top priority has been to bring quality medical care back to our area, especially emergency medicine. Working with Chester County, Penn Township, Southern Chester County EMS, the Pennsylvania Department of Health, other elected officials and ChristianaCare, my focus has been to facilitate a new beginning for the old hospital.

ChristianaCare purchased the facility in 2022 and set out to develop a new and sustainable model to deliver quality and necessary medical care to our region. They held a number of listening sessions, surveyed residents, and met with community and business leaders – all with the goal of designing a facility that meets the needs of our community. As you can imagine, opening a hospital is a complex undertaking. And while this process has taken longer than I think anyone would like, it is important to “get it right” so the new hospital – to be named “ChristianaCare West Grove Campus” – is sustainable both now and far into the future.

I meet regularly with the development team at ChristianaCare regarding this exciting project. My primary focus has been to reinforce the need for accessible and quality emergency medical care. I'm pleased to report that plans have been finalized for a new 20,000-square-foot community hospital, with both inpatient beds and a brand new 24/7 emergency room to serve southern Chester County. ChristianaCare has engaged Wohlsen Construction Company to oversee the project, with an opening date slated for late spring/early summer next year.

Interior construction has already commenced. I had the opportunity to get a first-hand look at these renovations a few weeks ago. The interior of the eastern end of the building has been gutted – walls and fixtures have been removed to allow for a complete reconstruction. For me, it was surreal to see the area that contained the old waiting room, the check-in desk, and patient rooms – demolished and ready for reconstruction. This area will be transformed into a state-



A few weeks ago, Rep. Lawrence met with ChristianaCare staff and team members from Wohlsen Construction to review the progress toward constructing a new emergency department for the new community hospital coming to Jennersville. In this photo, Rep. Lawrence is standing where the old Jennersville Hospital check-in desk once stood. The interior has been gutted in preparation for a complete transformation into a brand-new emergency room.

of-the-art emergency department with new equipment and new entrances for both ambulance transfers and walk-in patients. The facility will be equipped with the latest technology to treat heart attacks, strokes, broken bones and all the bumps and bruises that warrant a trip to the ER.

The existing medical office building on the western end of the campus will remain, but the old emergency room and part of the old hospital building will be demolished. A new health center will be constructed in its place. The old garage that housed Southern Chester County EMS (also known as Medic 94) for the last 40 years will also be demolished, as Medic 94 moves a few hundred yards down the street into a separate, brand new facility across from Dansko.

A number of folks have asked me if the helipad will remain or if there are plans to remove it. ChristianaCare will keep the helipad, and it will remain in use as necessary for patient transport.

As this project progresses through the winter months, you can keep up with the latest by signing up for the ChristianaCare West Grove newsletter. You can get on the list by scanning the attached QR code or by visiting the following website: [Christianacare.org/us/en/facilities/west-grove-campus](https://christianacare.org/us/en/facilities/west-grove-campus).

RepLawrence.com

Big Elk Creek State Park Update

My office continues to receive calls and emails regarding plans announced last November by the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) to develop Big Elk Creek State Park. The lack of transparency surrounding DCNR's past decision-making regarding the park, along with the tremendous response from our community, has increased the profile of this issue in Harrisburg. In addition, many of my colleagues in the Legislature have experienced challenges in recent years with DCNR failing to address longstanding issues in state parks across Pennsylvania. Given these issues, the House Policy Committee scheduled a hearing regarding DCNR's handling of the Big Elk Creek State Park situation to hear both from local stakeholders and to give DCNR an opportunity to speak on the matter in a public forum. Avon Grove High School hosted the hearing on July 9, and attendees included a number of local stakeholders, elected officials from across the state and a sizeable crowd of local residents.

The hearing lasted for over two hours, with three panels of testifiers addressing the committee. The first to testify was John Hallas, director of the Bureau of State Parks for DCNR. Director Hallas provided a brief overview of the state's acquisition of properties that now make up Big Elk Creek State Park and DCNR's planning process to date before taking questions from the committee.

Rep. Craig Williams (R-Delaware/Chester) asked Hallas a series of pointed questions regarding documentation submitted to the federal government by DCNR that clearly and repeatedly states the park will be used solely for passive, low-impact recreation. Hallas confirmed DCNR made these statements to the federal government, and further confirmed DCNR sought to designate Big Elk Creek State Park as a "replacement property" for other state lands that have seen oil and gas development in recent years. Hallas failed to justify how these past statements to the federal government would comport with DCNR's more recent plans to develop the park. Hallas also refused to tell the committee who approved the proposed development plans for Big Elk Creek State Park and, to the astonishment of the audience, repeatedly stated that Big Elk was "not a pristine wild area."

Rep. Kristin Marcell (R-Bucks) followed up with a series of concerns regarding Tyler State Park in Bucks County, which has seen significant issues over the last few years. DCNR has been unable to properly staff the park with enough park rangers, leading to repeated calls for the state police to step in to provide law enforcement. Marcell stated the situation was "out of control" and that previous attempts to address these issues with DCNR leadership have failed to bring any resolution. Director Hallas struggled to respond, suggesting that DCNR was looking to disperse some of the large crowds seen at Tyler State Park to other state parks, and that attempts to hire adequate staff had failed.

Rep. David Rowe (R-Union/Juniata/Mifflin/Snyder) brought up DCNR's significant maintenance backlog, questioning how DCNR could afford the proposed \$12 million buildout at Big Elk Creek State Park in light of a backlog of over half a billion dollars in deferred maintenance needs at other state parks. Rep. Donna Scheuren (R-Montgomery) spoke to concerns regarding the interplay between Big Elk Creek State Park, which does not charge admission, and Fair Hill Natural Resources Area in Maryland, which does.

I asked Hallas where the governor stood on the proposed development of Big Elk Creek State Park, given that hundreds, if not thousands, of letters, emails and petition signatures have been sent to the governor on this issue. Director Hallas claimed he did not know the governor's position. I further asked about discussions that have occurred in several forums, including the



Rep. Lawrence questions director of the Pennsylvania Bureau of State Parks, John Hallas, at the July 9 Committee hearing held at Avon Grove High School in Jennersville.

County Planning Commission, suggesting Big Elk Creek State Park, along with the White Clay Creek Preserve, and adjoining properties in Delaware and Maryland, could be a candidate for designation as a national park. But the main focus of my questions centered on the reason DCNR changed its decade-long position solely concerning preservation for Big Elk Creek State Park. DCNR consistently told elected officials, federal officials, the press, the general public and even the official publication of record for the state of Pennsylvania that Big Elk Creek State Park would be reserved exclusively for low-impact, wilderness uses without major development. Somewhere between March 2020 and May 2022, someone in the governor's office and DCNR changed this policy and instead directed the creation of a \$12 million development proposal. In my view, DCNR perpetrated a giant "bait and switch" on everyone involved.

Retired Sen. Andrew Dinniman (D-Chester) led the second panel of testifiers, strongly condemning DCNR's proposed development plans for the Big Elk area. Dinniman cited documents and meetings from his time as a state senator regarding commitments DCNR made to preserve this land. Franklin Township Supervisor David Gerstenhaber and Elk Township Supervisor Estace Walters also testified, expressing significant concerns regarding DCNR's recent on-site activities and DCNR's claim that proposed development does not need to abide by township zoning ordinances. County Commissioner Eric Roe spoke to the county's significant investment in Big Elk, noting that the county contributed over \$8 million to preserve Big Elk Creek State Park in keeping with the countywide comprehensive plan known as Landscapes 3.

The third panel included local residents Antea Consorto, Gary Schroeder and George Hundt. Antea has led grassroots efforts with Save Big Elk Creek and provided compelling testimony citing DCNR documentation from 2019 stating that the property will remain undeveloped. Gary Schroeder, founder of the Friends of the White Clay Creek Preserve, spoke directly to director Hallas, asking DCNR to redesignate Big Elk Creek State Park as a state preserve. George Hundt, executive director of S.A.V.E. (Safety, Agriculture, Villages and Environment), spoke to the need for DCNR to respect local zoning and reiterated concerns about the overall lack of transparency seen in recent months.

The hearing was successful in delivering a strong message to DCNR – namely that this issue remains of significant public interest and there is bipartisan support for DCNR to live up to the commitments made over the last 10 years. The hearing was also well received in the local press and with many of those in attendance.

I intend to emphasize the points made at this hearing at the next meeting of the Big Elk Creek State Park Advisory Committee, and to strongly advocate on this issue in the days ahead.



Members of the House Policy Committee heard from a variety of testifiers on the impact of DCNR's proposed development of Big Elk Creek State Park.

For more information, please check out my website at [RepLawrence.com/WCCPBECF](https://www.RepLawrence.com/WCCPBECF). In addition to video of the hearing, you can review reams of documentation, news articles and other key information on this issue.

State Budget Update

One of the most important topics addressed by the legislature each year is the enactment of a state budget. In February, Gov. Shapiro outlined his proposed 2024-25 budget to a joint session of the General Assembly. In the following weeks, the House Appropriations Committee held dozens of hearings with various state agencies to discuss their budget priorities. The head of each state agency, generally a member of the governor's cabinet, testified on their agency's budget needs. These budget hearings also provide an opportunity to discuss the performance, or lack thereof, of each agency. Frequently, questions come up regarding specific issues or challenges a state agency faces or has failed to address.

As a member of the House Appropriations Committee, I take these hearings very seriously. Committee members are limited to five minutes of questions at each hearing, so I try to make the most of the limited time provided to address issues of state and local importance. While space does not permit a summary of all my questions during budget hearings, I wanted to highlight a few of particular interest.

The Pennsylvania Department of Health oversees regulation of hospitals and health care providers within the state. Over the last 10 years, 28 hospitals have closed across Pennsylvania – nine since January 2022. While there are many reasons for these hospital closures, there are three key factors that I hear a lot about from doctors and hospital administrators: 1) Pennsylvania has a shortage of nurses, doctors and other medical providers; 2) malpractice insurance costs are rapidly escalating well above those in other states; and 3) Medicaid pays hospitals far less than it costs to provide services to patients. I see these hospital closures as a five alarm fire that demands state-level attention.

I raised these concerns with Secretary of Health Dr. Debra Bogen and asked her directly what her agency is doing to address the provider shortage, the state's malpractice environment and moribund Medicaid reimbursement rates. She did not answer my question, and instead talked about how her department lacks regulatory authority to order a hospital to remain open. Her response is very concerning to me. If a hospital is slated to close because it can't find enough staff and its costs greatly exceed revenues, a state edict to remain open is not going to sustainably solve the underlying issues. The best path to ensure our state's hospitals remain viable is to address the root causes of the issues they are facing. I'm working with a number of stakeholders, including the Hospital Association of Pennsylvania, to address some of these concerns in a practical and sustainable manner. But it would be very helpful to have leadership and support from the Department of Health on an issue of such key importance.

In a separate hearing, I questioned Pennsylvania Insurance Commissioner Michael Humphreys about his agency's role regarding auto insurance rates. State law requires auto insurance companies to submit proposed rate increases to the Pennsylvania Insurance Department for approval. Despite claims by the department that they "will not approve excessive rate increases," recent press articles detail auto insurance rate increases across southeastern Pennsylvania of 35% or more, even doubling in some instances.

Humphreys repeatedly cast doubt on these press reports and denied his agency would have approved such dramatic increases. He went so far as to claim that auto owners in Philadelphia have only seen a 0.6% increase in premiums over the last few years. His response seemed preposterous to me, so I asked him to submit data in writing to the committee chairman for further review. I also asked him to clarify how the state considers advertising costs when approving rate increases, given that several major insurance companies spend more than \$1 billion annually on advertising. In the weeks after the hearing, I sent



several follow up letters to the commissioner on this issue. His office responded with data that clearly shows the commissioner has indeed approved very significant insurance rate increases despite what was claimed during the hearing. You can view all our correspondence, along with video of our interaction at the hearing, at [**Replawrence.com/correspondence**](https://Replawrence.com/correspondence)

After budget hearings came to an end, budget negotiations began in earnest between the legislature and the governor's office. The governor proposed several new initiatives, including diverting \$282 million in sales tax revenue to a special fund for mass transit, borrowing \$500 million to hand out to businesses constructing facilities in Pennsylvania, a significant expansion of gambling and legalizing the sale of recreational marijuana. He also proposed combining the State System of Higher Education, which includes West Chester University, and the state's 15 community colleges into one state-operated entity. In total, the governor's budget proposal included an 8.4% spending increase over last year's budget.

The final proposal signed into law did not include legalization of marijuana or any immediate changes to the governance of West Chester University or local community colleges. But it did include authorization to borrow half a billion dollars for new programs on top of significant increased spending for a number of new government initiatives. While some of these proposals have merit, I could not support a final budget that spends \$2 billion more than anticipated revenue. This type of budgeting, spending more than we bring in, is simply unsustainable. In fact, the state's Independent Fiscal Office (IFO) just issued a report that confirms this accelerated level of spending puts us on a path to fully deplete the state's budget reserves by the end of next year. You can review the IFO's report at [**ifo.state.pa.us/releases.cfm**](https://ifo.state.pa.us/releases.cfm).

As I see it, elected officials must be responsible stewards of the hard-earned tax dollars sent to Harrisburg. I cannot support unbalanced budgets, spending billions more than incoming revenue and leaving the next generation an ever-increasing debt burden. These are things we see happening in Washington, D.C., and we should not emulate such fiscal irresponsibility on the state level.

More information about this year's state budget is available at [**PaBudget.com/2024-25Budget**](https://PaBudget.com/2024-25Budget).

State Representative
JOHN LAWRENCE



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**INSIDE
THIS
ISSUE**

**Updates on
Jennersville Hospital,
Big Elk Creek State Park,
and more!**



Rep. Lawrence met with Troy Ott, recently appointed dean of Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences, as part of a House Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee meeting during Ag Progress Days in State College. The committee discussed a variety of current topics facing the agricultural community and saw some of Penn State's latest research concerning issues with food production across the state.



Rep. Lawrence recently hosted a group of residents from Ware Presbyterian Village in Oxford at the state Capitol in Harrisburg. Among the group was former Rep. Art Hershey, who served Chester County in the state House from 1982–2008.