

State Representative

JOHN LAWRENCE

Serving Chester County

 RepLawrence.com

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 issues facing our Commonwealth.

The media tends to focus on national issues in Washington. Often issues at the state level seem to get little coverage, even though the decisions made in Harrisburg can have a significant impact. I want to make sure you know what is going on in the state Capitol, and this newsletter provides a brief summary of some of the legislation I have been working on recently. There are also updates on the newly created Big Elk Creek State Park, Chester Water Authority, and other issues of importance.

This session, I serve on four House committees – Agriculture and Rural Affairs, Appropriations, Professional Licensure, and Rules. These committees give me the opportunity to speak into policies as they are being developed. Service on the Appropriations Committee gives me the opportunity to interrogate leading state agency officials, including cabinet secretaries, to highlight issues of local and statewide importance. Many of these exchanges can be viewed on the video section of my website, RepLawrence.com.

Your thoughts and opinions on state government are very important to me. If you would like to discuss these or any other state-related issues in greater 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,



On Nov. 6 Make Your Voice Heard on Plans for Big Elk Creek State Park



Growing up in Kemblesville, White Clay Creek Preserve has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. Many in our area greatly value this incredible resource for recreation, preservation, and its unique history. Combined with White Clay Creek State Park in Delaware, and Fair Hill Natural Resources Area in Maryland, this unparalleled, interconnected tri-state area is a true treasure.

For those unfamiliar with its history, the White Clay Creek Preserve came into existence in the early 1980s when DuPont donated several thousand acres spanning the Pennsylvania-Delaware border to the respective states with the stated goal of creating a wilderness preserve. DuPont had acquired the property with the intent of damming White Clay Creek to create a reservoir to provide water for the greater Newark, Delaware region. After an outpouring of opposition from residents of both states, along with a reengineering of Newark's existing water infrastructure, the plans for the dam were shelved and DuPont donated the ground.

Since 1984, the preserve has been managed as a publicly accessible wilderness area with hiking, equine and bicycle trails, and limited hunting and agricultural activities. The preserve differs from a state forest or a state park and has been administered with a significant amount of local stakeholder input.

In recent years, several additional properties in Elk and Franklin townships were added to the White Clay Creek Preserve. In late 2022, in the waning days of his administration, then-Gov. Tom Wolf unilaterally redesignated the western part of White Clay Creek Preserve as a new state park, Big Elk Creek State Park. Under state law, a state park can have a significant variety of amenities – far more than what has traditionally existed in the preserve. The Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) has undertaken an effort to develop a master plan for the new Big Elk Creek State Park. DCNR hired an outside consultant that is currently determining future plans for the park's development.

I have significant concerns about former Gov. Wolf's unilateral redesignation of part of the White Clay Creek preserve, as well as DCNR's engagement of an outside consultant to plan the development of Big Elk Creek State Park. I strongly believe the new park should be administered in the same manner as the rest of White Clay Creek Preserve. To that end, I have introduced legislation that would require DCNR to manage Big Elk Creek State Park as it has historically managed the White Clay Creek Preserve.

DCNR has scheduled a public meeting to discuss the future of Big Elk on Nov. 6 from 6-8 p.m. at the International Cultural Center at Lincoln University.

This is an important meeting. If you are interested in the future of the newly created state park and want to speak into the process of what happens there, I strongly encourage you to attend. For more details, visit RepLawrence.com. You can RSVP your attendance plans directly to DCNR at BigElkCreekSP@pa.gov.

Chester Water Authority Update

For the past several years, I have been leading bipartisan efforts in the Legislature to stop any takeover of Chester Water Authority. Many in our area are very concerned about a proposed sale of CWA to private interests.

The CWA board unanimously rejected an unsolicited takeover offer five years ago. Since then, numerous lawsuits, the financial woes of the City of Chester, disputes over the governance of Chester City, and other unrelated issues have served to greatly complicate efforts to keep CWA independent.

There have been several recent developments that affect efforts to keep CWA independent. In July, Commonwealth Court issued a landmark decision in the case **Cicero v Public Utility Commission**, overturning the PUC's approval of the sale of East Whiteland Township's sewer system to corporate ownership on the basis that the sale would harm consumers and result in higher utility bills. This important precedent could impact any proposed sale of Chester Water Authority, likely making a proposed takeover more difficult to gain PUC approval. While the court's decision is still being analyzed, I see it as a positive development.

In another development, late last year the state-appointed receiver for the City of Chester took several related actions in short succession. First, on Nov. 7, 2022, (Election Day, when the eyes of the press were focused elsewhere) the receiver filed in Commonwealth Court for a modification of the city's Amended Recovery Plan. Page 56 of the modified plan specifically states that the receiver is "pursuing the monetization (sale) of the Chester Water Authority." Three days later, the City of Chester filed for Chapter 9 bankruptcy in federal court. That same day, the receiver filed a motion in federal court citing Section 362(a) of the federal bankruptcy code asking for a stay on any outstanding litigation involving Chester City.

This stay (or hold) included a case that had been slated to be heard by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court in late November 2022 regarding the ownership of Chester Water Authority. Chester claims that the city can unilaterally order the sale of CWA. I and many others believe **Act 73 of 2012** clearly terminated any authority Chester may have had to order the sale of CWA. I filed an amicus brief in support of CWA on this case and was looking forward to attending the hearing at the Supreme Court. However, the hearing never happened, since the city's bankruptcy filing put all other court cases involving Chester on hold. Also of note, the receiver asked the court to allow the city's Amended Recovery Plan be allowed to proceed, despite the stay ordered because of the bankruptcy filing. As of this writing, these legal issues remain ongoing.

I continue to advocate in the Legislature on this issue as well. Earlier this session in the state House, I introduced a package of



four bills (**House Bills 626, 627, 628, and 629**) to change state law regarding proposed sales of municipal water and wastewater systems. Specifically, **House Bill 627** would require a ratepayer referendum prior to any sale of a water or wastewater authority, giving people most affected the ability to speak into decisions regarding ownership. Similar protections already exist in neighboring New Jersey.

I am also trying to obtain copies of two "credible plans" regarding Chester City's finances that were referenced by Chester Mayor Thaddeus Kirkland during a public meeting earlier this year. Press reports indicate that these plans potentially include the sale of Chester Water Authority. I have filed three Right-To-Know requests in an attempt to acquire copies of these plans, and recently appealed to the Pennsylvania Office of Open Records to order their release under the provisions of the state's Right-To-Know Law.

There are other important developments regarding CWA that deserve your attention. For a more complete history of this issue, along with details about my efforts to keep CWA independent and links to many of the documents referenced in this article, visit RepLawrence.com/CWA.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

While space limitations preclude a robust discussion of every bill under consideration in the House, I want to provide a brief update on a few bills that have generated a lot of calls to my office.

- **House Bill 1100**, which I supported and was recently signed into law, expands eligibility to the state's property tax relief program for senior citizens. If you have questions about the Property Tax Rent Rebate Program, or need assistance in filing for it, please do not hesitate to reach out to me at the Jennersville office.

- **House Bill 1219** calls for significant changes to Pennsylvania's tax code including a complete rewrite of Pennsylvania's corporate tax laws. It would also give special tax breaks to the City of Reading, direct millions of dollars in new tax breaks to medical marijuana growers, tens of millions in new tax breaks for movie producers and divert hundreds of millions from sales tax collections to mass transit. I voted "no" on this bill, which passed the House by one vote (102-101.) It is now headed to the Senate for consideration. To see my floor remarks on the bill, visit RepLawrence.com/video/latestvideo.

- **House Bill 1616** – School and student safety is a primary concern for parents, teachers, administrators and the community. A recent security incident in our community brought to light the need to change state law regarding student transfers from one school to another. In response, I introduced House Bill 1616 to require pending disciplinary records to be transferred from a student's former school to the prospective school in a timely manner. This bill has been referred to the House Education committee for review.

For more information on proposed legislation, please visit RepLawrence.com.

Grateful: A Community Comes Together in the Face of Tragedy

Like many in our community, I awoke early on Sept. 14 to the news of a devastating fire in downtown Oxford overnight. After stopping by the grocery store to pick up a few cases of bottled water and ready-to-eat snacks, I made my way to Penn's Grove Middle School, where the American Red Cross had established a shelter for residents who had just lost everything they owned in the fast-moving blaze.

The Red Cross had, in very short order, set up the gymnasium with beds, blankets, and chairs. Down the hall, the cafeteria became the canteen, with hot meals and snacks. I was deputized to manage the snack area for those affected by the fire as well as volunteers assisting in the shelter. For the rest of the day, I had a front row seat to the incredible generosity and community spirit that makes our small corner of the world such a blessed place to live.

A number of the Red Cross volunteers were familiar faces from across southern Chester County. In addition to their everyday work, they volunteered to get woken up in the middle of the night to immediately and cheerfully respond to crisis situations like this one.

Also in immediate response were community members from the Light-house Youth Center, the Neighborhood Services Center, LCH, SILO, and local churches. And they were not milling around looking for something to do – they actively and professionally sprang into action to practically meet needs with loving responses. Folks displaced from the fire were asked their sizes and an area business provided them with brand-new clothes. Children who had the trauma of seeing their homes on fire earlier in the day were given special attention, stuffed animals, and many hugs. My staff was onsite for most of the day helping as needed as well.

Businesses both large and small, without being prompted, showed up outside the Penn's Grove cafeteria with pallets of Gatorade, water, orange juice, potato chips, soft pretzels, breakfast sandwiches, fresh fruit, trail mix, chocolate milk pints, cookies, hot food, and more. At one point I looked around the cafeteria and wondered where we were going to put all of the donated food.

Anyone who has seen the Penn Grove cafeteria knows there is a large bank of windows that overlooks Fifth Street. All day long, fire trucks passed by delivering water to the station set up along Third Street. More than 30 surrounding fire companies from Lancaster, Chester, and Delaware counties, and from Maryland and Delaware responded to what eventually became a five-alarm fire. Seeing tankers, trucks, and personnel from near and far coming alongside the brave and tireless firefighters of Union Fire Company – was truly incredible. Thank you to each of these mutual aid companies, some of whom came from very long distances, to assist Oxford in its hour of need.

Throughout the day, reports from downtown trickled into the shelter – it became apparent that at least four buildings were heavily damaged. All I could think was – it is a miracle no one lost their life. And it is another miracle that only those buildings were lost. The heroic firefighters from Union and beyond deserve endless praise for stopping the fire from consuming the whole block. I cannot express enough thanks to the firefighters and fire police, both from Union and those from surrounding mutual aid communities, for their 12, 16, and 24+ hour shifts combating the fire.



Third Street in Oxford on the afternoon of Sept. 14. Demolition had already started on what remained of the buildings gutted by the five-alarm fire.

As afternoon became evening at Penn's Grove, a Red Cross staffer shared with me and my staff that they had been involved in dozens of emergency situations up and down the east coast, yet they had never seen anything like the outpouring of support from the community in Oxford. They were literally speechless concerning Oxford's response. Things that normally take days for the Red Cross to coordinate instead were coordinated by local folks in a matter of hours. It is a testament to this community that deserves to be recognized.

Oxford has seen tragedy before. I remember, as a child, the Oxford Presbyterian Church fire in 1989. That fire left a gaping hole in town that was eventually filled with a new, vibrant building that has been serving the community since the day it reopened. In truth, it is not the building, but the people in the building that make the difference.

I don't think it is a stretch to compare that tragedy and rebirth to today. We have another gaping hole, this time in the middle of town. The rebirth and renewal will take time, but I have no doubt that Oxford is up for the challenge. And what results will build upon the long, proud history of this town to bring about an even stronger testament to the strength and spirit of Oxford.

Tragedy brings out the true colors of a community. What I saw, what I heard, what I witnessed – it deserves to be recognized for what it is – a community with deep roots and real care and love for friends and neighbors. I am grateful to every person who showed up, sacrificed, and served. We should all be grateful to be a part of a community that leaves the Red Cross speechless.

Audit Reveals More Questions on \$50 Million Lyme Timber Deal

The Pennsylvania Infrastructure Investment Authority, or The Pennsylvania Infrastructure Investment Authority, or PENNVEST, is a state agency charged by law "to give low-interest loans and some grants to owners and operators of sewer, water, and stormwater systems for infrastructure improvements." Over the past 50 years, nearly 3,000 municipal water and sewer projects across Pennsylvania have been funded through this program.

In 2018, PENNVEST authorized record-breaking loans totaling \$50 million (with a 1% interest rate) to Lyme Timber, a New Hampshire-based private equity company. Lyme was not looking to fix a municipal sewer system - they used the money to buy 60,000 acres of timberland in northwest Pennsylvania for their private investors.

After this situation came to light, the House Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee held an informational meeting to get some answers. The Committee learned that Lyme Timber Company approached the

Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) looking for financing to buy the timberland. DCNR connected Lyme with PENNVEST, who facilitated what some have called a sweetheart deal - a \$50 million state loan at a mere 1% interest rate.

Earlier this year, the auditor general issued a report raising serious concerns around this transaction. In my view, it is scandalous and outrageous that \$50 million intended to assist local municipal water and sewer systems, was instead diverted to a private equity fund from New Hampshire for the benefit of its investors.

I am introducing legislation to take up the recommendations of the auditor general and institute other commonsense reform measures to prevent further abuse of PENNVEST. For more information on this, including a link to the auditor general's report, please visit RepLawrence.com.



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Chester County Students Receive Lesson in Leadership



I recently hosted the Youth Leadership Program sponsored by the Chester County Chamber of Business Industry for a day at the state Capitol. The program provided high school students from across the county the opportunity to visit the House chamber and hear directly from state officials on current issues facing Pennsylvania.

Repeated Jailbreaks Demand Answers and Oversight

Like many across Chester County, my family and I closely followed the weeks-long manhunt for escaped felon Danilo Cavalcante. His escape from the Chester County Prison on Aug. 31 was an international news story and left me and many others with serious reservations about the county's management of the prison in Pocopson. Who can forget the video of Cavalcante, a convicted murderer, crab-walking up the wall of the outdoor recreation area and disappearing onto the roof? As was widely reported in the press, a similar jailbreak occurred at the prison just a few months earlier, yet the prison failed to adequately address the situation to prevent another escape. This failure directly led to a weeks-long search effort costing millions of dollars and involving resources and personnel from across the nation.

The Chester County prison operates under the authority of the County Prison Board, which is made up of elected county officials and appointees. County prisons operate with little state oversight. This lack of oversight came up earlier this year during budget hearings, when I questioned the Pennsylvania Secretary of Corrections

regarding a number of serious incidents at the Delaware County Correctional Facility.

With all of this in mind, I recently introduced legislation that would require the state Department of Corrections to conduct a full security and staffing review at a county prison that experiences an escape or attempted escape. Pennsylvania State Police and other law enforcement resources will be tasked with addressing flaws to ensure issues are addressed. This proposal has seen bipartisan support and is part of a larger package to holistically address this issue.

I would like to thank the Po-Mar-Lin fire company in Unionville for offering their firehouse as a temporary field office for state and national law enforcement agencies during the manhunt. I had the opportunity to spend some time at the firehouse with the state police, Border Patrol, US Marshalls, and many other local, state, and national law enforcement officials during the early stages of the search. The coordinated response and the dedication of all involved was instrumental in bringing Cavalcante to justice. Thank you to all for your service to our community.

