



# YOUR REPORT

*from State Representative*

# ROBERT FREEMAN

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## Lafayette College trail project receives \$869,000 grant

Lafayette College will use an \$869,694 state grant to undertake a multi-use trail project.

“I’m very pleased to see this Lafayette trail project become a reality, because it was suggested by me during a conversation and tour of the grounds that I had with some college administrators several years ago,” said Rep. Robert Freeman, who was instrumental in securing the grant. “It will provide a safe path for pedestrians and bicyclists to access College Hill and the surrounding neighborhood and be accessible to the general public.”

Lafayette College was awarded the grant to address infrastructure gaps in Easton’s pedestrian and bicycle networks by creating a multi-use path to link an existing parking lot along South College Drive on the east end of campus to the midpoint of the historic staircase and continue toward Bushkill Drive where it will connect with the popular Karl Stirner Arts Trail along the Bushkill Creek. The trail will be constructed north of College Avenue where there is a 150-foot drop between Lafayette College and downtown. The path will have a distinct start and end, but it is designed to easily connect to additional pedestrian and bicycle networks on other ends of campus and the College Hill neighborhood. It will establish a new connection point with the historic stairs that will

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## Residents’ concerns prompts fireworks bill by Freeman

To address the concern of residents about the increased use of fireworks being discharged, Rep. Robert Freeman introduced legislation that would give municipalities more authority to regulate the use of fireworks and would increase penalties for violating those regulations.

“There has been a growing concern on the part of residents regarding the use of consumer fireworks. Many people witnessed widespread abuse of the use of fireworks in many residential neighborhoods that proved very disruptive to people’s lives and undermined their quality of life by having to endure the discharge of such fireworks throughout

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## Communities with high percentage of tax-exempt properties would be compensated under Freeman legislation

Special financial assistance would be provided to municipalities with high levels of tax-exempt property, such as institutions of higher learning, nonprofit medical facilities, government property or state forests and game lands, under a legislative proposal introduced by Rep. Robert Freeman.

“Municipalities in the Lehigh Valley and across Pennsylvania with a large amount of tax-exempt properties are faced with the challenge of providing residents essential services without the real estate tax base of other communities,” said Freeman. “My legislation would provide annual financial assistance to those affected municipalities, giving them the ability to provide the essential services that ensure the health and safety of their residents and can put their community in a more stable financial position to attract economic development.”

Freeman explained that H.B. 1702 would establish the Tax-Exempt Property Municipal Assistance Fund to help

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## Fireworks bill continued...

the day and late into the night,” Freeman said. “This disruptive behavior is unacceptable and must be reined in.

“My proposal would provide local governments with the authority to pass local ordinances to better regulate the use of fireworks and to impose substantial penalties for the violation of those local ordinances.”

Under Freeman’s bill (H.B. 1628), a municipality could enact an ordinance regulating the use of consumer fireworks, provided that the ordinance does not conflict with state law. The bill would limit the use of fireworks to between 10 a.m. and 9 p.m. Sunday through Thursday and 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. on Friday and Saturday, with extended hours for certain holidays.

Additionally, the legislation would require each consumer fireworks purchase to include a notification that provides the conditions, prohibitions and limitations for using fireworks.

Those who violate the municipal regulations would face increased penalties under Freeman’s bill. A first conviction would be a summary offense with a fine between \$100 and \$500. A subsequent offense committed within one year of a prior conviction would be a third-degree misdemeanor with a fine between \$500 and \$1,000.

According to the 2017 law, fireworks cannot be discharged:

- on public or private property without express permission of the property owner.
- from, within or toward a motor vehicle or building.
- within 150 feet of an occupied structure, regardless of if a person is present.
- while the person is under the influence of alcohol, a controlled substance, or another drug.



*Rep. Freeman and Rep. Patty Kim at a House Democratic Policy Committee hearing on fireworks held in Whitehall Township last year.*

“We need to give local governments the ability to deal with this disruptive behavior and impose substantial penalties for violating local ordinances. My proposed legislation would give them that option,” Freeman said.

Freeman, who voted against the 2017 state law that allows consumers, 18 or older, to purchase and use “Class C” or “consumer-grade” fireworks is also co-sponsoring H.B. 988 that would outright repeal the 2017 fireworks law, reverting to what was previously permitted in Pennsylvania.

“One of the reasons I opposed making these fireworks legal back in 2017 was because I thought they would be disruptive and unsafe,” Freeman said. “If those using fireworks cannot do it responsibly with consideration for how disruptive they can be to a neighborhood, then the legislature has no other recourse than to repeal the 2017 fireworks law. If we can’t get the votes in the legislature necessary for an outright repeal of the 2017 fireworks law then, at the very least, we need to enact my legislation to give local governments the authority to crack down on the abusive use of fireworks so that communities don’t have to endure the type of disruptive behavior caused by an irresponsible use of fireworks.”

## Freeman bill would promote redevelopment of neglected factory buildings

New state tax incentives would be created to promote redevelopment and reuse of derelict factory or mill buildings in Pennsylvania municipalities under legislation reintroduced by Rep. Robert Freeman.

“Repurposing an old factory or mill for retail, office or arts space, or transforming them into dwellings, encourages economic development and improves the quality of life of a community,” Freeman said. “Using a building for the purpose other than what it was originally intended for is a way to reuse buildings that have stood in our communities for decades. Some of the buildings have withstood the test of time for more than 100 years. They might be neglected, but they are still standing. My bill would provide an incentive to breathe new life into these buildings – many of which are part of a community’s heritage and identity.”

Freeman’s H.B. 2280 would establish three types of tax incentive programs:

- A 25% tax credit for the rehabilitation and reconstruction costs incurred by the owner.
- A business tax credit equal to the salaries and wages paid to full-time employees, up to a maximum of \$5,000 per employee.
- An interest income tax credit of 10% on the interest from loans for the expenditures within the building. The limit would be up to \$10,000 per taxable year. The loan holder would also be eligible for a 100% tax credit, up to \$20,000 per taxable year, on interest from loans for substantial rehabilitation.

Freeman said adaptive reuse isn’t a new concept and pointed to the number of old industrial buildings around the Lehigh Valley that have been repurposed. The Silk Mill on North 13th Street in Easton is one example of a successful adaptive reuse of an old factory complex.



## Personal Notes...

### Legislative reapportionment and the importance of communities of interest

Dear Friends,

Every 10 years the Pennsylvania General Assembly is required to go through a reapportionment process to redraw legislative district lines for state Senate and state House districts as well as redistrict Pennsylvania's Congressional districts. This process is required so that all legislative and Congressional districts reflect the population changes of the decennial census. U.S. Supreme Court rulings in the 1960s mandated that all legislative districts of a state legislative body be roughly equal in population to ensure that districts receive equal representation and that every vote cast carries equal weight in elections.

The process follows two different procedures. For Congressional districts, the lines drawn are determined by a bill that is passed by both houses of the General Assembly and is signed into law by the governor. When the bill cannot be agreed on by all three parties, the issue is ultimately determined by the state Supreme Court, which decides the configuration of Congressional district lines in the absence of an agreed-to map. Because of Pennsylvania's comparatively slow population growth, its Congressional delegation will shrink from 18 to 17 members, which makes the redistricting process even more daunting.

For state Senate and state House reapportionment, the process laid out in our state constitution follows a different procedure. District lines are drawn by a Legislative Reapportionment Commission (LRC) comprising five members, four representing the four legislative caucuses and a chairman who is supposed to be chosen by the four caucus leaders. When they cannot agree on a choice for chairman, the state Supreme Court selects the chairman, as happened this time.

In many respects, the work of the LRC has been far more transparent and inclusive of public input than previous reapportionment processes. Numerous public hearings have been held on the preliminary maps that were drawn and testimony on those preliminary

maps guided the LRC in drawing the final maps. The result has been districts that meet the constitutional standard for compact and contiguous districts of roughly equal population. However, another very important consideration that was not as present in the preliminary maps is that districts reflect "communities of interest." Communities of interest take into consideration a variety of factors that reflect a shared connection with neighboring municipalities and what region they are a part of. Factors can include demographic similarities, a shared regional history, culture, and present-day circumstances and opportunities. Other factors might reflect a shared ZIP code or postal station, a shared school district, shopping patterns, and, importantly, that the communities of a district are part of the same county.

The biggest change that was proposed in the LRC's preliminary map for the 136th District that I represent, as it is currently constituted, was to take Hellertown out of the district and place it in the neighboring 131st District. That district is a predominately Montgomery County and Lehigh County based district that Hellertown would have little association with that could result in Hellertown's interests being an afterthought. Hellertown would have been the eastern extremity of a district that stretches across Montgomery and Lehigh counties, barely penetrating Northampton County under the preliminary map. Hellertown has been a part of the 136th District for 50 years, ever since the 1968 state constitutional convention created single member House districts. Hellertown shares a "community of interest" with the other municipalities that make up the 136th District because of its long association as a component part of the 136th District.

In response to the preliminary map, Hellertown Borough Council, with the support of Hellertown's mayor, unanimously passed a resolution and sent it to the LRC requesting that Hellertown be restored to the 136th District. The resolution noted that "the 136th District includes other Northampton County communities with similar resources

and compatible concerns" and affirmed that "the current 136th District communities have spent years embracing a common identity and shared pride that has evolved under the guidance of a shared legislative district and the resources and knowledge it provides." Numerous residents commented online and sent letters to the LRC urging that Hellertown be restored to the 136th District. I wrote a letter to the chairman of the LRC also requesting the restoration of Hellertown to the district and even testified before the LRC at their public hearing held in Harrisburg on January 7th. In my testimony before the LRC, I spoke about the importance of addressing "community of interest" considerations in drawing legislative district lines. I noted that they are just as significant to a good reapportionment map as are compact and contiguous districts. Even under the best of plans, important "community of interest" nuances as they pertain to small communities can often be missed in reapportionment as they were in the case of Hellertown. I urged the LRC to heed the request of the unanimously passed resolution and restore Hellertown to the 136th District.

Our voices were heard. As a result, the Legislative Reapportionment Commission restored Hellertown to the 136th District in the final map, which, as of this printing, is before the court for review.

I want to thank all of those who expressed to the LRC their desire to keep Hellertown in the 136th District. From elected and community leaders to the many concerned residents and citizens who recognized the importance of "community of interest" considerations and Hellertown's long-standing association as a component community of the 136th District. I also want to thank the LRC for hearing those concerns and restoring Hellertown to the 136th District.

Sincerely,

Bob Freeman

## Tax-exempt properties continued...

municipalities with 15% or more of their total assessed property value as tax-exempt property within their borders. It would be funded by the state's existing 18% Liquor Tax, known as the Johnstown Flood Tax.

"Many of the tax-exempt properties in our communities are significant employers and are important regional assets, but being tax exempt means they do not pay real estate taxes to their host municipality. That puts an undue burden on residential property owners in those communities who must pick up the slack," Freeman said. "A high percentage of tax-exempt properties within a municipality's borders leaves the affected community with a greatly diminished tax base, which in turn makes it difficult to provide essential services. My legislation would provide the financial compensation necessary to put these high tax-exempt property municipalities on a sounder financial footing to ensure their stability and success as a community.

"The liquor tax helped to rebuild Johnstown after it was devastated by a flood in 1936," Freeman said. "That was a long time ago, and it's time to target that money to municipalities that are falling further into financial distress simply because they have significant amounts of tax-exempt properties within their boundaries. This legislation can help hundreds of communities across our commonwealth, including those municipalities that are under the Act 47 Financially Distressed Municipalities program, as they have a high percentage of tax-exempt property."

In the Lehigh Valley, the legislation would provide significant funding to Allentown, Bethlehem, Easton, Fountain Hill, and other municipalities with high percentages of tax-exempt properties.

The legislation would require each county to annually provide the state with information regarding the assessed value of tax-exempt properties. The funding formula would be based on the assessed value of those properties as if they were taxable. No municipality would receive more than 10% of the total revenue in the fund, and property owned by the municipality itself would not be eligible for compensation.

## Lafayette College trail grant continued...

head southwest toward Bushkill Drive. The trail will end at the bottom of the escarpment on Bushkill Drive, providing a direct link to the Karl Stirner Arts Trail and area designated for exhibiting artwork.

"The trail will provide outstanding views of downtown Easton from the escarpment. This project will expand the trail network in Easton and enhance the community's quality of life," Freeman said.

The college has committed an additional \$372,726 to complete the project.



*L to R – Mary Wilford-Hunt of Lafayette College, Speaker of the House Bryan Cutler, Lafayette College President Nicole Hurd, Rep. Freeman, and Maurice Luker of Lafayette College in the House chamber during a visit by President Hurd to the Capitol last year.*

## Freeman bill would permit extensions to Main Street program participants

Legislation that would allow communities to extend their participation in the state's Main Street Program for up to a total of 10 years awaits consideration by the full state House of Representatives, according to the bill's sponsor, Rep. Robert Freeman.

"Communities in the Main Street Program often need to extend their time in the program to fully implement their plan and achieve their revitalization objectives. This legislation would add a needed option of a program extension," Freeman said.

"Too often, funding ends just as a community's Main Street initiative begins to make headway with implementing revitalization plans. The result is an undermining of the ability for these communities to fully realize the plan's objectives. Under my legislation, communities would be better positioned to fully succeed in their objectives for revitalization and enhancements to downtown commercial areas."

According to Freeman, H.B. 926 would give the state Department of Community and Economic Development the authority to grant a period of up to five additional years for administrative costs associated with employing a Main Street manager if it determines that it would be beneficial to the community in reaching its revitalization goals.

"Once it becomes law, my bill would allow the department to determine whether additional time for a community to participate in the program would ensure that the plan is fully implemented and revitalization objectives are met," Freeman said.

The Main Street Act was created to provide grants for commercial downtown revitalization efforts, including infrastructure improvements, marketing and promoting the established commercial downtown within the Main Street area, and façade grants, all under the direction of a Main Street manager. Currently, grants are provided to fund the position of a Main Street manager only for a five-year period.

Easton's Main Street Initiative has done an excellent job of promoting downtown Easton with programs that have been an integral part of its revitalization. Easton's Main Street Initiative has been a Nationally Accredited Main Street Program since 2007 and has received numerous awards and recognition for its outstanding record of success, including being named four times as the No. 1 performing Main Street program in Pennsylvania by the Pennsylvania Downtown Center.

## Freeman proposes tutoring program for all public schools

Providing students in 11th and 12th grades with academic credit for tutoring elementary school-aged children could improve academic performance in Pennsylvania's public schools.

"Tutoring is a time-honored and cost-effective way to enhance academic performance for the student being tutored and the student who serves as a tutor," said Rep. Robert Freeman.

"The benefits of high school students tutoring elementary students is abundant. Tutoring can increase good study habits, improve academic performance, boost self-esteem and put students in charge of their own learning process as they pass that knowledge onto younger students. The students being tutored would get the

extra attention they need to improve their academic performance and younger students are typically more receptive to learning from a high school student who would serve as a mentor," he said.

Freeman said his legislation (H.B. 1933) would require the state Board of Education to establish a statewide tutoring program, which would provide academic credit to students in 11th and 12th grades for tutoring pupils in grades one to six.

School districts would be able to implement the program at little or no cost to taxpayers and it would foster a sense of community and pride in students while enhancing academic performance, according to Freeman.

## Bills would address blight and homelessness in tandem

Rep. Robert Freeman has introduced legislation aimed at addressing the findings from a Joint State Government Commission study on homelessness in Pennsylvania, while also providing a pathway for communities across the commonwealth to turn blighted properties into affordable housing options -- impacting an estimated 15,000 Pennsylvanians experiencing homelessness, (either being on the streets, doubled up with family or friends, or in shelters) on any given day.

"The study conducted by the Joint State Government Commission concluded that one of the primary causes of homelessness in Pennsylvania is a lack of affordable housing," Freeman said. "Simultaneously, here in the Lehigh Valley, and communities across the commonwealth, blight has turned troubled properties into liabilities.

"My legislation, (House Bills 960 and 961) takes a 'housing first' approach, to address the twin issues of blight and homelessness."

According to Freeman, his legislation would provide a directive to municipal land banks to convert a portion of the blighted properties they acquire into housing for the homeless and would provide a tax credit under the existing Neighborhood Assistance Program to private developers who partner with land banks and nonprofit organizations to rehabilitate such properties.

Specifically, H.B. 960 would expand the powers of land banks to enter into partnerships with organizations in the private sector to create local solutions to address the lack of housing for the homeless population within their community and exempt all land bank transactions from both state and local realty transfer taxes. House Bill 961 would expand the eligibility criteria of the Neighborhood Assistance Program to include homeless housing assistance programs or projects among the eligible activities and uses of contributions under the program.

"My legislation addresses a real need in our communities and is an important consideration in dealing with affordable housing issues and homelessness," Freeman said.

## Local projects benefit from state funding

Rep. Robert Freeman's legislative district received several state grants in 2021. Below is a list of some of the projects receiving state funding that Freeman helped secure:

**Greater Easton Development Partnership** received \$100,000 to be split evenly for two projects under the COVID-19 Relief funding – Supporting Elm and Main Street Programs:

- Easton Main Street Initiative
- Easton's West Ward Community Initiative

**The Greater Easton Development Partnership** was awarded a separate \$300,000 Keystone Communities Program grant that will allow the partnership to complete the Church Street pedestrian plaza and exterior improvements for the Easton Public Market.

A \$142,000 Greenways, Trails and Recreation Program grant was awarded to **Hellertown** for improvements to Authority Park, where the Hellertown Pool is located across from Dimmick Park. The project will involve:

- Construction of an addition onto the existing concession stand that will include a small storage area for the concessions and two unisex handicap-accessible restrooms
- Installation of a metal roof on the concession stand to be consistent with all other roofed facilities in the recreational complex
- Upgrades for handicap accessibility and parking

The Commonwealth Financing Authority provided funding through the Monroe County Local Share Account and Northampton Local Share Account programs for these recipients:

- \$206,990 to **Hellertown Borough** for park improvements at Dimmick and Authority parks
- \$222,215 to **West Easton Borough** for continued work on the Public Works Garage

**Wilson Borough** was awarded a \$306,000 state grant to modernize the traffic signal at Butler Street and Freemansburg Avenue/South 18th Street/Palmer Street.

A separate \$125,000 grant will allow **Wilson Borough** to reconstruct four tennis courts at Meuser Park. The existing tennis courts are in poor condition and the fence is rusted, warped and bent. Reconstruction will involve demolishing the existing fence and tennis courts, reconstructing new tennis courts from the base up and adding new fencing.



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## Property tax circuit breaker proposed by Freeman

Taxpayers are looking for relief from rising property taxes and Rep. Robert Freeman is offering a proposal to address that concern.

“It seems that nearly every year property taxes go up and the bills get more difficult to pay for many families and especially older Pennsylvanians on a fixed income who are struggling to stay in their homes,” Freeman said.

Under legislation introduced by Freeman (H.B. 1851), the state constitution would be amended to allow property tax circuit breakers to be used in Pennsylvania.

“A property tax circuit breaker is quite simple; it would protect taxpayers from a property tax overload just like an electric circuit breaker. Specifically, it would exempt homeowners from having to pay that portion of their property tax bill that exceeds a certain set percentage of their household income,” Freeman said. “This proposal would offer Pennsylvania homeowners needed property tax relief and build fairness into the property tax system.”

In Pennsylvania, a proposed constitutional amendment must pass the General Assembly in two consecutive legislative sessions before being placed on the ballot to be considered by the state’s voters. If the Pennsylvania electorate approves the proposal, Freeman said enabling legislation would need to be passed by the General Assembly and signed into law by the governor to institute property tax circuit breakers and to set the percentage threshold amount of property tax to household income that would trigger the circuit breaker.

## PACENET income limits increase by \$6,000

Rep. Robert Freeman voted to increase income limits by \$6,000 for the PACENET prescription drug program under a new state law so that more seniors will be eligible to participate.

The law increases enrollment for the state’s Prescription Assistance Contract for the Elderly Needs Enhancement Tier, known as PACENET, by about 20,000 people and raises the income limits to \$33,500 for a single person and \$41,500 for a married couple.

The new law provides financial incentives for PACENET enrollees to also sign up for federal Medicare Part D prescription coverage. Additional funds generated by increased participation in the federal prescription program will be used to pay for the increased PACENET income limits.

### Hellertown Days:

Rep. Robert Freeman makes himself available to meet with constituents from the western end of his district in Hellertown Borough Hall on the first Thursday of every month from 10:30 a.m. until 2:30 p.m.