

League of Women Voters Speech

Good evening. It's a pleasure to be with you for this gathering of the League of Women Voters of Lehigh County. I appreciate the invitation and this opportunity to address some issues that are a priority for me throughout the rest of this legislative session and undoubtedly important to you.

For 86 years, the League of Women Voters has served a very important role in all levels of politics and has continues to work to inform and empower not only women, but all citizens to the political process and protecting the liberties set forth by our nation's constitution.

I have been elected to do my part legislatively to uphold these same liberties and continue the democratic process that our forefathers laid out. For the remainder of this legislative session, I plan on working to push forward priority legislation that residents of my district, the Lehigh Valley and all Pennsylvanians can benefit from.

One of these priorities is an issue that has sparked many debates in Lehigh County – especially in the Allentown and Bethlehem areas – gaming. I was opposed to the legalization of slots in Pennsylvania – and still am – but, the fact remains that slots casinos will be implemented.

I can, however, do my part to fix any loopholes or areas of interest that missed the mark the first time around. We must ensure that the Gaming Control Board and the casino owners follow an ethical standard of practice. I voted to pass a measure through the House that would prohibit public officials and their families from owning financial interest in a gaming facility, establish a code of conduct, allows the Attorney General to have

more authority in problem casino investigations, and so on. These measures are a step in the right direction, but not a final solution.

If we have to live with the casinos, they should be held up to strict standards that would curb any potential problems in and outside of the community. The gaming industry must conduct business and act within the best interest of Pennsylvanians, not themselves or the companies that are set to make a profit.

We must also ensure that our community organizations and non-profits are not hindered by these large casinos and that they have a fair chance to compete. Fire departments, church groups, veterans groups and other non-profit organizations rely heavily on money earned through bingo and other small games of chance; however, they are hindered by antiquated laws that establish a ceiling on the daily jackpot allowance, thereby crossing into illegal thresholds of prize amounts for some organizations.

Recently, as reported in the Harrisburg Patriot-News and on the Bob Durgin show, law enforcement officers have begun to crack down on these operations. Our local non-profit groups are an important part of our neighborhoods and look to community members to fund their organization and its charitable functions. Through two bills that I have drafted, it is my hope that these groups can continue to succeed and prosper, and to carry on the vital services provided to our communities, by nominally updating these antiquated amounts to a more modern amount. These bills are now before the Senate for concurrence.

We must also tackle the issue of controlling health care costs. We need to end lawsuit abuse, a major contributor to our state's rapid decline in medical professionals and increase in health care costs. Due to the number of lawsuits that attack the depth of the pocket and not the level of fault, malpractice insurance premiums have skyrocketed, causing your health care to rise with it.

In February of 2004, the Allentown Morning-Call ran an article about the shortfalls that could come if there was no reform to our malpractice laws. According to the article, the Pennsylvania Medical Society claimed that statistics from 1990 showed that Pennsylvania ranked 12th nationally in the number of physicians under 35. In the 14 years that followed, Pennsylvania had dropped 29 spots to 41st nationally. Our state is home to some of the best medical schools in the nation; however, upon graduation we are losing these doctors to other states.

Obstetrician-gynecologists are among the hardest hit by the mounting malpractice insurance premiums. According to a survey by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG), one-quarter of Pennsylvania OB-GYNs say they have stopped or are planning to stop the practice of obstetrics, many have stopped performing surgery, and many are closing their doors or moving to other states. As the father of three daughters, this is troubling.

I do not want to see Pennsylvania fall deeper into a healthcare crisis. There is a bill on the governor's desk that would cause defendants in malpractice cases to pay based on the proportion of one's relative fault, not

the size of their pockets. Whether the legislation is signed or vetoed, I will continue to work towards controlling health care costs.

I also remain committed to property tax reform. We are currently at odds with varying proposals but I am confident that progress will be made in the upcoming months on this important issue.

And, as always, I plan to continue to push forward legislation supporting our troops. While our state and country remain divided on the war effort, one thing remains certain: we must support the men and women fighting overseas. Our legislature has already passed several bills into law that deal with our military and veterans, and I have lobbied the Senate to push through three more pieces of legislation that I have sponsored that will provide important benefits to our military personnel, as well as provide a safer environment for college student housing in the way of fire suppression systems.

This is only a short list of my priorities for the rest of the legislative session. Just as your group is committed to the well being and liberties of citizens of Lehigh County, the Commonwealth and the nation, I am committed to serving and being a voice in Harrisburg.

It means a great deal to have been invited to speak to your group this evening. Thank you for the honor you have bestowed upon me and may you continue to spread your positive message and be a positive force throughout our communities.