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COLUMN FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Semmel Seeks Incentive for Sprinkler Installation in Off-Campus Housing

HARRISBURG – Legislation sponsored by Rep. Paul Semmel (R-187) that would provide loans to private owners of approved student residences that install automatic sprinkler systems has been approved by the House and is on its way to the Senate.

“Back in 2001 we established a grant program that helps subsidize projects to retrofit existing college-owned dormitories and housing units with sprinkler systems,” Semmel said. “However, more and more students are moving off campus as a way to cut college expenses or they chose to live in their sorority or fraternity house. These young people deserve the same safety protection that those who live in the dorms receive.”

According to a 1999 study by the Education Department, there were 900 fraternities and sororities associated with Pennsylvania’s 142 colleges, of which 63 percent were **not** equipped with any form of automatic sprinkler systems. Additionally, of the 630 that are independently owned housing and not covered under the Dormitory Sprinkler System Act, 90 percent had no sprinkler systems. The study estimated the cost for installing sprinklers to be between \$11.8 and \$22.4 million.

“The Center for Campus Fire Safety reports that as of 2000, over 80 percent of fire-related student fatalities occurred in off-campus houses and apartment,” Semmel said.

“Such tragedies can very often be avoided with automatic sprinkler systems. My legislation would allow for college students and their parents to rest better at night, knowing a sprinkler system will kick in to help get a fire under control and allow time for escape.”

House Bill 781, known as the Automatic Fire Suppression System Loan Program, would provide low-interest loans to owners of student residences to cover a portion of the cost of installing a sprinkler system. The program would be voluntary and no owner of a private residence housing students would be required to participate.

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To qualify, a student residence must not be owned by the college or university, but must house at least five students and must not currently be required to have a sprinkler system.

Priority would be given to loan applicants who own housing in municipalities that have enacted ordinances requiring the installation of automatic sprinklers that are stricter than those required under the Pennsylvania Construction Code.

"My legislation will serve as an incentive for owners to install these systems," Semmel said.

The bill now moves to the state Senate for consideration.

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State House Establishes Scholarship Program

By Rep. Paul Semmel (R-187)

At a recent reunion of approximately 400 former and the present 203 serving House members, House Speaker John M. Perzel unveiled a new statewide scholarship program that will be funded by individual and corporate donations.

The idea of creating a non-profit program that brings current and former members together and establishes the scholarship fund was initially suggested by a bipartisan group of members.

Former House members have a wealth of knowledge about the work of the General Assembly that can be invaluable to the newer members. By forming a program that brings the two groups together periodically, a real exchange of experience, historic background and perspective will lead to better-crafted legislation and a wiser legislative body.

However, the best part is that House members and alumni will be offering scholarships to high school seniors. Under the program, college-bound Pennsylvanians who meet certain criteria will be eligible for two scholarships in the spring of 2004.

The first two scholarships will be given in honor of two deceased Speakers of the House – Matthew J. Ryan, Speaker from 1981-82 and 1995-2003 and James J. Manderino, who served as Speaker in 1989.

The Speaker's Office is working with the Greater Harrisburg Foundation (a charitable community foundation) and the Treasury Department's Tuition Account Program (TAP) to establish the scholarship program. The foundation will administer the scholarship selection and award process and enable scholarship fund donors to receive tax deductions in accordance with its 501(c) 3 charitable status.

Donations to the scholarship fund will be invested with the TAP Guaranteed Savings Plan, the tax-advantaged college savings program authorized by the General Assembly in 1992.

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TAP's investment objective will be, over time, to grow the fund's earning so that the size and number of scholarships can be increased.

The House members and alumni are making the initial donations to get the fund off the ground. However, the foundation is developing programs to promote the scholarship program and encourage both individual and corporate donations.

As the criteria and application process is established for the 2004 scholarships, I will be sure to let 187th District high school seniors, their parents and school districts know.

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June 11, 2003

House Continues to Address Medical Crisis

*Broad-based proposal would allow for caps on non-economic damages
in all civil liability cases*

By Rep. Paul Semmel (R-187)

Last week the House continued efforts to resolve the medical malpractice crisis in the Commonwealth by passing legislation that would allow voters to decide whether to amend the state constitution to limit awards on non-economic damages in civil lawsuits.

House Bill 1326, if approved in two separate sessions of the General Assembly, simply gives voters the ability to decide if they want to give the Legislature the ability to set maximum amounts on non-economic damage awards. Currently, caps are prohibited under the state constitution.

It's our belief that amending the constitution to permit, the Legislature to place limits on non-economic damages should stabilize the insurance market over the long term. This, in turn, will help bring our health care system back into balance by further ensuring that doctors and hospitals will be here to give the quality care our citizens expect and deserve.

However, I am disappointed that some House Democrats didn't support our effort to pass another bill that provided for an emergency constitutional amendment that would have expedited the process so that the issue could have appeared on this November's ballot. This legislation fell only four votes short of the necessary two-thirds majority needed to pass.

Recognizing that doctors and hospitals are not the only ones facing outrageous jury awards, the proposal covers all civil lawsuits. We did this because the size and unpredictability of jury awards is having a detrimental impact on the state's economy in general. Pennsylvania is one of only four states where caps on non-economic damages are unconstitutional.

Predictability resulting from the cap is quite possibly the only way to draw insurers back into the Commonwealth and make affordable insurance available not only to doctors and hospitals, but also to our business community.

Providing for caps on jury awards is just one part of a balanced approach the House took last week to preserve health care for our residents. Other legislation now in the Senate would place physician profiles on the Department of State's Internet site, give doctors a discount on medical liability insurance and create a grant program for health care providers.

House Bill 158 is a comprehensive measure that would allow consumers to use the Internet to review a physician's educational background and accreditation, experience, disciplinary action or sentencing, revocation or restriction of hospital privileges, judgments, and any arrests for specified offenses.

Also included in this measure is a provision to give doctors who have a claims-free liability record for the past five years a 15 percent discount on liability insurance purchased through the Joint Underwriting Association (JUA).

House Bill 158 also creates a need-based program to provide health care providers with a reduction in their MCARE assessment. Grants would be awarded based on a physician's financial need, as well as to ensure access to health care in all regions of the Commonwealth.

Realizing that the process for enacting caps is lengthy – involving passage by two consecutive sessions of the legislature before it can go the voters – we plan to consider additional short-term measures that relate more directly to the medical liability crisis.

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April 10, 2003

Semmel Hosts Parkland Area H.S. State Champion Football Team

Lehigh Valley lawmakers introduce team and coaches to House Colleagues

HARRISBURG – Rep. Paul Semmel (R-187) hosted the 2003 Class 4A state champion football team and coaches from Parkland Area High School during a recent House of Representatives session.

Along with Reps. Julie Harhart (R- 183) and Doug Reichley (R-134), Semmel introduced team members and coaches to House colleagues and presented the team with a House of Representatives Congratulatory Citation.

“Our Parkland Trojans came away from the Class 4A state gridiron battle as the first ever Lehigh Valley 4A state title holders after defeating Pittsburgh’s Woodland Hills team 34-12,” Semmel said.

“What is even more significant is that team members and coaches alike agreed that their successful season can be attributed more to their ability to function as a single unit, rather than to the abilities of any one individual star player.

“That remark reminded me of the often quoted phrase from Alexandre Dumas’ classic historical novel, *The Three Musketeers*, ‘All for one and one for all,’ a rather profound approach to living life that still holds credence in the 21st century,” the Schnecksville lawmaker said.

Head coach Rob Melosky credited members who made several good plays during the championship game, but also stressed the close unity of the whole squad, pointing out that “what one guy might lack in ability, there were 10 others there to pick him up.”

Semmel praised the coaches and team leaders for recognizing and teaching the group that being part of a team and working together toward a goal is one of the most important life-learning lessons young people need to know as they move into today’s working world.

The House citation congratulated the Trojan football team and its coaches for taking the PIAA Class 4A 2003 state football championship and expressed the best wishes of the House in future endeavors.

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Attention Editors: Below is the caption for a photo attached to this email in jpeg format.

State Champ Trojan Football Team Visits Capitol...Posing on the Capitol Rotunda steps with the members and coaches of the Parkland Area High School football team are (front row, left to right) Reps. Paul Semmel and Julie Harhart. Standing behind Harhart is Rep. Doug Reichley.