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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 12, 2004

House Oks Funding for Disabled Veterans Transportation Network

HARRISBURG The state House this week adopted an amendment to the 2004-05 budget proposal to provide \$250,000 for the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) transportation network, said Rep. Paul Semmel (R-Berks/Lehigh).

"With House approval of this amendment, we are a step closer to continuing a state funding line I first secured for the DAV back in the 2001-02 budget," said Semmel, who chairs the House Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee. "I've been very proud to have led this effort that has enabled the DAV to purchase more than 22 new vans over the past three fiscal years.

"With an increased fleet, the DAV now is able to provide transportation to thousands of additional Pennsylvania veterans."

The Schnecksville lawmaker said the continued funding of the program is essential in making sure veterans have access to needed transportation for health care visits.

The DAV has operated a transportation program for veterans traveling between the eight VA medical centers across Pennsylvania and their homes or designated pick-up and drop-off locations since 1988.

This service is provided free of charge to veterans, many of whom are using the program for service-related disabilities and have limited incomes and health care resources.

"With the increased number of our men and women now serving in Iraq and Afghanistan and, unfortunately, the number of wounded returning, I think people are recognizing the contributions and sacrifices of our military personnel. Continuing our respect, gratitude and services to them is the least we can do," Semmel said.

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The DAV Transportation Network program has approximately 270 volunteer drivers logging more than 1.5 million miles per year while transporting approximately 55,000 veterans to centers for medical care and services.

Semmel said he would now work with Senate leadership and the governor's office to ensure this appropriation is included in the final 2004-05 budget that must be enacted by June 30.

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 3, 2004

Providing for Our Protectors
By Rep. Paul Semmel (R-Berks/Lehigh)

Our heroes serving around the world are our National Guard men and women and our reservists who are serving with our noble active duty personnel. Pennsylvania has deployed the largest contingent of the National Guard to Iraq, Afghanistan and Kosovo. They serve as our protectors in the war zones and hot spots around the globe.

As chairman of the House Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee, I have had the responsibility and privilege of shepherding a package of bills through the House that will help these heroes and their families.

With these four bills, we're taking action to help with real life issues that affect thousands of Pennsylvania families. Since our world has changed and placed increased burdens on our heroes and their families, we've seen where current laws need updates to best serve the needs of those who are protecting us. They focus on clearing obstacles that inflict needless hassle on our heroes and their families.

The first bill corrects a glaring absence in Pennsylvania law. Currently, reservists who defend our country on the front lines are not eligible to receive the same benefits as enlisted members upon their return home.

Why? The state law cannot technically recognize reservists who serve in combat zones as "veterans" under Pennsylvania's Veterans Preference law. House Bill 2055 will change the language and ensure reservists who serve in combat are given the same honor and state benefits bestowed on their "full-time soldier" comrades. These heroes and their families deserve equal treatment under the law.

House Bill 2081 addresses the aggravation and financial losses imposed on servicemen who are reassigned or called to active duty and are trapped in leases. Since service men and women and National Guard members and their families are especially prone to frequent moves, the "lease trap" situation comes up regularly for those simply answering the call to serve. This bill brings Pennsylvania in line with new federal requirements and even goes a few steps further in ensuring fair treatment for our servicemen and women.

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The third bill amends Pennsylvania's present Firefighter, Ambulance Service, Rescue Squad, Law Enforcement or National Guard Line of Duty Death Benefits Act. This law is ambiguous on heart attacks and strokes that occur "after" an emergency or training incident. House Bill 2285 provides for state death benefits for those who die after suffering a heart attack or stroke within 24 hours of a physical training exercise or emergency response.

Unfortunately, many Pennsylvania families have suffered the terrible circumstance of a loved one dying shortly after responding to an emergency. The trauma was doubled by the denial of certain benefits.

Finally, the fourth bill ensures that reservists who are called to active duty suffer no ramifications in auto insurance coverage if they need to suspend their policy. With this legislation, insurance companies will be prohibited from canceling, imposing surcharges or removing premium discounts on policies of active duty reservists. House Bill 2348 will address a nagging problem that no serviceman or woman should have to face.

In times when our military and first responders are in the forefront of national and international activities, we're responding to their needs with sensitivity and forethought. We're taking action to help with real life issues that affect thousands of Pennsylvania families.

The four bills now move to the Senate where I will continue to shepherd them through the process to the governor's desk.

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Paula Hand - Rep. Semmel's Press Release

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STATEMENT FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**April 21, 2004**

Semmel Appreciates President's Recognition
Realizes the importance of improving homeland security

HARRISBURG - Rep. Paul Semmel (R-Berks/Lehigh) today issued the following statement in response to the personal recognition of him offered by President George W. Bush in a recent speech before the Pennsylvania Association of Township Supervisors in Hershey.

"It was indeed an honor to have been singled out - along with Sen. Charles Dent (R-Lehigh) - by President Bush for our efforts as chairman of the House and vice chairman of the Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness committees respectively.

"The president explained to the audience of township supervisors that it is the job of our committees to 'make sure the state of Pennsylvania is properly prepared for anything that many come along.'

"The House committee has been holding hearings across the Commonwealth as directed by House Resolution 273 to conduct a study to identify the state's security-related needs and communicate those needs directly to Washington.

"Our findings and recommendations will help Pennsylvania leverage new federal homeland security investment dollars for critical infrastructure such as seaports, airports, bridges, tunnels and rail lines.

"We've held seven hearings to date in which the committee has analyzed the current security of the Commonwealth's internal and international transportation facilities, financial institutions, medical facilities and water systems.

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"The ability of the state's medical and emergency response communities to respond to terrorist acts is also being reviewed. We're now compiling our report that will include suggested legislative action.

"During his remarks President Bush talked about the need for Congress to renew the federal Patriot Act. I agree that we must continue to support this legislation that gives our law enforcement agencies further tools to fight terrorism. However, it is important that the act remain flexible so that it can change with the ebb and flow of national and international events."

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Paula Hand - Reps. Semmel, Reichley and Harhart's Press Release

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

October 29, 2004

Legislators Announce Support for Extension of Military and Overseas Absentee Voters Ballot Deadline

ALLENTOWN - Members of the Lehigh Valley Delegation, including Reps. Doug Reichley (R-134), Julie Harhart (R-183) and Paul Semmel (R-187), and Sen. Charlie Dent (R-16) held a press conference near the 213th Area Support Group Armory in Allentown protesting Gov. Ed Rendell's stance on extending the absentee ballot deadline for military and overseas voters.

A new deadline of Nov. 10 at 5 p.m. has been established by federal court for counting overseas military and other absentee votes.

"After initially opposing an extension, Rendell flip-flopped and agreed to ask the court to extend the deadline to a week from today, but the court took that even further today, allowing absentee ballots from overseas to be counted up to eight days after the Nov. 2 election, but that still may not be enough for every military and overseas voter to get their ballots submitted due to delays in sending ballots out," said Reichley.

"It is sheer hypocrisy for the governor to deny the right to vote to soldiers fighting for democracy overseas while at the same time informing incarcerated criminals at state prisons of their right to vote and promoting the use of absentee ballots by prisoners on the state government's website. If it hadn't been for pressure from Republicans and families of overseas voters, Rendell's decision would have been to disenfranchise voters who did not receive ballots from counties in sufficient time to get them mailed back by today's 5 p.m. deadline," Reichley said.

"I think it's appalling that soldiers fighting for our country could be left out of a free

election, which is a right they are fighting for overseas," said Harhart. "Clearly, more time is needed to allow all votes to be counted. Let our soldiers vote!"

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Semmel said, "It is unimaginable that these brave men and women, who are shedding their blood to help others gain the right to vote, could be disenfranchised by the democracy that they are willing to die for. I appreciate the decision of the court to extend the deadline, but I am calling on Gov. Rendell and the State Department to do whatever it takes to make sure the absentee ballots of all overseas soldiers are counted."

The legislators welcomed the announcement of the agreement to extend the deadline for counting military and overseas absentee ballots by eight days from Election Day, but Reichley pointed out that Rendell extended the deadline for the same ballots by 24 days this past April. At that time, the extension was to give military personnel a fair chance to cast their votes in light of all the litigation challenging primary candidates that forced delays in the issuance of absentee ballots.

"If a 24-day extension was good enough in the spring, it certainly is the least the governor should be offering now to our men and women putting their lives in harm's way on behalf of our country. Otherwise the governor will be illustrating he has greater concern to count the votes from offenders in Pennsylvania rather than from those who are defenders of our security," said Reichley.

The deadline for timely submission of absentee ballots in the Election Code is Oct. 29 at 5 p.m. In light of the court decision released today, the deadline for counting absentee ballots would be Nov. 10 at 5 p.m.

Lehigh Valley General Assembly members supported a motion filed in Philadelphia federal court by the families of two soldiers serving overseas who said their sons did not have ample time to receive their absentee ballots and mail them back by the Oct. 29 deadline in time to be counted for the Nov. 2 election

Because of procedural and administrative delays, many members of the military fighting and serving overseas - soldiers, sailors, reservists and national guardsmen - and other United States citizens living abroad did not receive their absentee ballots in a timely fashion. This was due to litigation involving Ralph Nader's ballot eligibility. Soldiers serving in remote areas are supposed to have their ballots mailed 70 days prior to the election.

"The voting rights of soldiers serving overseas should not be abridged because absentee ballots were not received in time to have them counted," said Reichley. "We supported the families of soldiers petitioning the court for at least a 15-day extension of the absentee ballot deadline, as opposed to the one week requested by Rendell. It remains to be seen if eight days after the election will allow enough time to count all overseas absentee votes."

The federal court decision applies only to presidential election votes, but the governor said he would ask Commonwealth Court to extend the deadline to count votes for state offices to Nov. 10 as well.

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First in a two-part series

Slots Law Contains Many Flaws

It is bad public policy

By Rep. Paul Semmel (R-Lehigh/Berks)

Notwithstanding the many social and moral arguments against gambling, Pennsylvania has just enacted an expanded gambling law containing many flaws that make it bad public policy for a variety of reasons.

First, Act 71 of 2004 does not allow for the auctioning of slot licenses. A recent auction for a casino in suburban Chicago netted more than \$500 million. Yet, license fees for casinos in Pennsylvania are set at a fixed fee of \$50 million, except for two licenses for resort casinos that will go for just \$5 million.

We're missing the opportunity to raise millions of dollars upfront that could have been used to substantially reduce property taxes as well as aid economic development. Sadly, eight amendments calling for auctioning of the licenses were never considered.

Second, if the gaming law is changed within five years of the initial issuance of slot licenses, except in cases where a majority of the gaming board recommends a change, the slot owners will get their licensing fee back and will be able to keep their gambling license. If the law is changed in the sixth through 10th years, the licensee will get back a prorated amount and retain the license.

This is ridiculous, and screams of undue influence by the gaming industry. Licensees will not only be refunded their license fees but will be able to continue to operate slot machines for profit. Furthermore, this prevents the Legislature from correcting any errors or unforeseen problems that may be discovered as the law takes effect.

Third, there are no provisions in the law to give the state police or attorney general a role in monitoring and enforcement of slot machine gaming. In addition, the law has no anti-

rackeering language, which works to eradicate organized crime by attacking the sources of its revenue, such as syndicated gambling or bookmakers.

Because the gaming board holds all the cards in policing the slot machine facilities along with the lack of power given to the state police and attorney general and lack of anti-rackeering language, there is a great concern that the slot machine facilities will bring organized crime into our Commonwealth.

Fourth, under the law a conditional license can be issued to a racetrack for 18 months. If the racetrack does not receive a permanent license, the track owners would be reimbursed for 85 percent of their \$50 million licensing fee. This again shows the favoritism in the law because the racetrack will have made substantially more than \$50 million in this time period.

Finally and perhaps most disturbing, the law allows public officials and gaming board members to own up to 1 percent equity in a gaming company. Even 1 percent will open up the arena for improper influence.

Those supporting this provision said it was inserted to address public officials and gaming board members who have invested in mutual funds and have no control over how those funds are reinvested. That situation could and should have been resolved with language that strictly limited equity to mutual funds while prohibiting the direct purchase of stocks and shares.

Now that Gov. Ed Rendell – who has pushed for slots in Pennsylvania since he took office – has signed the legislation into law, we can only hope for the best. We certainly cannot open the issue up for at least 10 years. Otherwise, taxpayers will have fork over more than \$700 million in refunded license fees – money that will have been spent, among other ways, to provide homeowners some desperately needed property tax relief.

In my next column I will discuss Act 72 of 2004, the companion legislation putting into motion that tax relief with estimated revenues from slots.