

The County Commissioners Association Of Pennsylvania
The Voice Of Pennsylvania's Counties

Remarks By James Kennedy

CCAP President and Butler County Commissioner



Good afternoon. I am Jim Kennedy, commissioner from Butler County and 2009 president of the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania. CCAP is a nonprofit, nonpartisan Association representing Pennsylvania's 67 counties.

Commissioners who serve on the CCAP Board and represent counties across the state have joined me today for the unveiling of our Association's 2009 legislative priorities. These priorities reflect a consensus of commissioners throughout the state regarding issues of highest significance and greatest potential impact on our counties.

Our members have selected nine priority issues that the Association will be working hard to advance under my leadership in the next twelve months. These priorities demonstrate our commitment to improve tax equity for local residents, to improve government efficiency and to seek real cost savings while working to assure that funding decisions at the state level do not adversely impact local taxpayers.

As in previous years, our top priority is tax fairness. We will continue to call on the General Assembly to authorize optional local tax bases such as the sales tax or the personal income tax in return for a dollar-for-dollar reduction in property taxes. Pennsylvania residents continue to seek relief from all real estate taxes, not just the school property tax.

Tax fairness also includes restoring the ability to assess property taxes on oil and gas interests. Counties had this ability prior to a 2002 Pennsylvania Supreme Court decision and have this capacity for other mineral resources like coal and gravel. Currently, the majority of counties around the state are experiencing the impacts of Marcellus shale drilling and exploration. Yet Pennsylvania remains one of the few states with significant oil and gas production that does not permit property taxes, which is unfair to the other property tax payers. In addition to restoring the property tax assessability of oil and gas, we urge the House and Senate to make sure that any new revenue source derived from the Marcellus shale include a share for local governments.

Much attention has been dedicated to fiscal crises that exist at the state and local level. County governments are facing a fiscal crisis every bit as severe as the commonwealth's, and in fact, budgetary decisions made by our state leaders have compounded the problems Pennsylvanians face at the local level. Commonwealth budget issues again rank second on our list of legislative priorities. This includes traditional human service programs, as well as support for other county-related programs such as conservation districts and cooperative extension.

In 2008, decisions were made in state budget negotiations to fund many of the human services the state requires counties to provide at levels lower than the actual need. Facing deficits in the current fiscal year, the state has announced further cuts to the already-insufficient FY 2008-2009 commonwealth budget.

While we are sensitive to the state's fiscal difficulties, county commissioners will stand together to demand that the state adequately fund mandated and necessary services.

... continued on back



Serving Counties Since 1886

17 North Front Street Harrisburg, Pennsylvania 17101-1624 (717) 232-7554

www.pacounties.org

Funding cuts at the state level do not automatically equate to cost savings for taxpayers. If the Governor and the General Assembly do not do their part to fund mandates, they should also be accountable to the public for shifting costs to the local level, where property owners will pay for their decisions through increased property taxes.

Funding and administration of the courts, including funding of the requirements established by Act 57 of 2005, the Full-Time District Attorney's Act, are also a CCAP priority.

In response to the commonwealth's failure to fund its share of the full-time district attorney salaries, as well as to implement a 1987 Pennsylvania Supreme Court decision on funding and administration of the judicial system, CCAP filed again with the Court in 2008 to seek enforcement of its earlier ruling.

The Court has ruled that a lower court system funded by 67 counties with disparate fiscal capacities creates an inherently unequal system of justice. The state has failed to take steps to achieve the equity required by the courts, and in fact has shifted more responsibility to the local level.

Zero dollars were appropriated in the FY 2008-2009 commonwealth budget to meet the state's district attorney salary obligation for 2008 despite a clear statutory requirement to reimburse counties 65 percent. Counties are owed full reimbursement for calendar years 2008 and 2009, plus partial reimbursements outstanding from 2006 and 2007. For each year the state shirks its responsibility, the price tag for taxpayers is more than \$100,000 per county.

The remaining 2009 CCAP priorities cover a range of topics. Funding for local roads, bridges and mass transit must be addressed alongside state funding needs to assure reliability of the entire transportation network. Reauthorization of fees that support the 911 emergency response system is also needed.

To sustain local recycling programs, the Association also seeks legislation that will allow restoration of fees to be used specifically for recycling efforts. Counties ask for quick action to clarify how special uses of land enrolled in a preferential assessment program known as Clean and Green impact eligibility.

CCAP members are engaging in special task forces to take a focused look at issues related to oil and gas development in the Marcellus shale region, as well as mentally ill in jails. These groups will be developing policy recommendations to share with state leaders.

Our goals are ambitious, and we do recognize that a very difficult budget year lies ahead for everyone. However, we also believe that the tough economic times provide an opportunity for innovation. Counties are committed to doing their part to inform these discussions and suggest new ways of doing business. We will advance a list of mandate relief suggestions that will achieve savings at the local level. We will also be prepared to consider new revenue at the state level if it will benefit the services we provide and the constituents we serve.

Thank you for your attention. You can find a listing of all the priorities in the folders that have been distributed to you. We will gladly answer any of your questions.