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**PENNSYLVANIA'S COUNTIES UNVEIL PRIORITIES FOR 2007
Local Tax Fairness and Human Services Funding Among the Top**

HARRISBURG (Jan. 17) –County leaders from throughout Pennsylvania today unveiled their list of 2007 key legislative priorities and called upon state leaders to strengthen their commitment to accomplish tax fairness for counties and the people they serve, while also adequately funding mandated human service programs.

County leaders were in Harrisburg to discuss these and other key county legislative priorities including the place of confinement and reimbursement for state inmates in county jails; elections; bridges, mass transit and transportation; county recycling fee authorizations; conservation and land use; correcting constable fees and billing; correcting district attorney and judicial salaries; and repair of the 911 funding system. County leaders said the priorities reflect concerns that citizens have in their home counties.

Percy Dougherty, Lehigh County Commissioner and president of the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania (CCAP), said “these 2007 priorities are as diverse as Pennsylvania’s counties themselves. I think they very appropriately call attention to the wide variety of issues with which counties must deal every day. Often times, our citizens and state lawmakers are not aware of the breadth of services counties provide.”

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Dougherty said that it is unmistakably clear that property taxes continue to rank as one of the top concerns of Pennsylvanians, and that Pennsylvanians seek a solution to all property taxes, not just school property taxes. He said numerous statewide polls support CCAP's position that Pennsylvanians want to have county and municipal property taxes addressed.

"Two of our priorities, tax fairness and funding human services mandates, are connected to the property tax crisis that continues to cause concern among taxpayers," he said. "Without a commitment by the state and federal governments to honor their obligations to fund mandated and entitlement services, counties are currently left with few options other than raising local taxes to cover these mandated program shortfalls," Dougherty said.

State and federal laws require counties to provide a broad array of services, including courts, corrections, emergency management, 911 systems, election administration, and solid and hazardous waste planning. Human services that counties provide to the community include caring for abused and neglected children, helping families with addiction or mental health challenges, preserving the dignity and respect of senior citizens, and similar programs critical to providing a safety net to our most vulnerable citizens.

According to CCAP, county governments have no control over unfunded mandates or the budget impacts that accompany them. The Association said that today, 80 to 90 percent of county budgets are driven by service demands and mandates from the federal and state governments.

Citing Pennsylvania counties' reliance on property taxes as an almost-exclusive local revenue source, Dougherty said it has "become politically popular and expedient for the state and federal government to transfer revenue responsibility and responsibilities for programs to the local government level, and counties in particular. This has resulted in an explosive growth in new responsibilities for county governments which has led to an equally explosive growth in county budgets and budget shortfalls.

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“Unless the General Assembly expands the property tax agenda to include alternative tax bases for counties, meeting the needs for services and programming can come only through increases in the county property tax, which CCAP believes places an unfair burden on property owners,” he said.

County leaders met with legislative leaders throughout the day to discuss their 2007 legislative priorities. In addition to tax fairness and funding human services mandates, county leaders also unveiled these additional priorities:

PRISONER PLACE OF CONFINEMENT/REIMBURSEMENT: The Association supports a statutory change requiring all offenders sentenced to more than two years to be committed to the state correctional system for confinement. Currently, judges have discretion about where they send state offenders sentenced for two to five years – either county or state prison. Requiring state prison confinement for inmates sentenced for two or more years would provide an alternative to county prison expansion and alleviate space and budget constraints on their prisons. It is also fairer to an offender because it eliminates a “gray area” in the law. In the absence of a change in the place of confinement statute, the Association is calling for state reimbursement to counties for all offenders sentenced for more than two years to the county correctional system.

ELECTION ISSUES: Counties are responsible for the most essential service in a democratic society – the conduct of elections. Counties responded exceptionally well to HAVA implementation requirements, including replacement of older voting systems with new electronic systems. Although the equipment performed almost flawlessly, unfounded fears of accountability of electronic systems continue to be perpetuated and for 2007, counties will have to respond to efforts at the state and federal level to legislate Voter Verified Paper Audit Trails (VVPAT), a measure most election professionals deem unnecessary and potentially in violation of security and privacy requirements. Legislative initiatives are also expected on changing the date of the Presidential primary, as well as on registration, identification, absentee and other matters relating to voter responsibility and election administration.

CONSERVATION AND LAND USE: Counties have a role in land use planning, farmland and open space preservation, water quality and other environmental issues. The Association supports programs to promote use of alternatives to fossil-based transportation fuels, including incentives for counties to deploy hybrid vehicles and vehicles operated by alternative fuels. Counties seek increased funding for farmland and open space preservation, as well as authority to levy a realty transfer tax of up to one percent to generate revenue for farmland and open space preservation. CCAP also seeks funding for water quality initiatives such as the Chesapeake Bay Tributary Strategy, including development and implementation of stormwater management plans.

BRIDGES AND MASS TRANSIT: Counties are responsible for the maintenance of more than 4,000 county-owned bridges, funded with a gas tax allocation that has remained largely unchanged since 1930. With a lack of infrastructure funding, many of these bridges are structurally deficient and many others are approaching the end of their useful life. Mass transit funding issues are also significant to counties, as there are more than 30 mass transit systems covering more than two-thirds of the counties in Pennsylvania. The Report’s recommendation on county and municipal bridge and highway funding lacks clarity and, depending upon the potential distribution, the funding recommendation is likely to be significantly less than is needed. The Association supports prompt legislative action on the Report, and insists that county bridge funding needs be included in these legislative deliberations. Counties support a half-cent increase in the state’s liquid fuels tax, or an equivalent amount from another transportation funding source, that would be allocated to counties based on each county’s relative bridge responsibility.

CORRECT JUDICIAL AND DISTRICT ATTORNEY PAY: Counties are responsible for paying district attorney (DA) salaries, with a partial Commonwealth reimbursement. The DA salaries are linked by statute to judicial pay, but the recent pay raise, pay raise repeal and partial judicial pay reinstatement, leave confusion about the correct pay level for DAs. The pay raise law intended DAs salaries to be 95 percent of the judicial pay level, the repeal reinstated a higher \$1,000 less than judicial pay calculation and the judicial reinstatement did not clarify which methodology to use. CCAP supports clarification of the original legislative intent, 95 percent of judicial pay. At the same time, the judicial pay law links state judicial pay to that of federal counterparts, where active consideration of an increase of as much as 16 percent is anticipated. Because this increase at the federal level will ultimately result in increased taxpayer expense for DA salaries at the local level, CCAP supports legislation repealing the link between state judicial salaries and the salaries paid to the federal equivalent.

911 IMPLEMENTATION: Counties have responsibility for one of the key functions in public safety, the operation of the 911 call-taking and dispatch system. Counties are in the midst of implementation of enhanced systems to locate wireless callers, and seek legislation to facilitate location of callers from PBX and similar systems. Legislative and administrative assistance is also needed to assure that users of new technologies, including VOIP and other internet services, can place emergency calls to the correct call center, and be assured of correct emergency dispatch. A key component of this system is assurance that telephone system providers are properly collecting and remitting the subscriber fees that support the development, deployment and operation of these systems.

CONSTABLE FEES AND BILLING: In 2006, legislation was signed into law increasing the fees that constables can collect for the services that they provide, the first the fees had been increased in some time. Tucked away in the law is a material change, the impact of which was not understood at the time the legislation was passed. This material change has led to a significant taxpayer burden for constable fees. As a result of a minor wording change in the law, constables can now bill multiple \$25 docket fees for a single service, and counties are now experiencing billing by constables where a single multiple-docket service that used to cost approximately \$100 can now be several thousand dollars for one trip to one defendant.

COUNTY RECYCLING FEE AUTHORIZATION: Due to a court decision, counties can no longer levy a local administrative fee to fund supplemental county recycling programs such as household hazardous waste collection, electronics recycling, recycling drop-off centers, illegal dump enforcement and cleanup, and tire recycling. This ruling has left counties without a source of revenue to fund these programs and, beginning in 2007; many supplemental local recycling programs will be cut or eliminated. A decrease in the availability of recycling programs will result in more recyclable goods filling up space in landfills, and a proliferation of illegal dumping on public and private lands. This will have an adverse impact on the Commonwealth's environment and the quality of life of many Pennsylvania residents, and will undermine the public's investment in the Growing Greener bond initiative. Counties are seeking an alternative funding stream for these recycling programs.

For more information about these county issues, log on to the CCAP website, www.pacounties.org and click on "Priorities-Platform" or call 717-232-7554.

CCAP is a statewide, nonprofit, bipartisan association representing the commissioners, chief clerks, administrators, their equivalents in home rule counties and solicitors of Pennsylvania's 67 counties. The Association serves to strengthen the Pennsylvania counties' ability to govern their own affairs and improve the well-being and quality of life of their constituents.