

STATE REPRESENTATIVE

Bob Merski

REPORT TO THE PEOPLE OF THE 2ND LEGISLATIVE DISTRICT



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Tuesday ONLY 8:30 a.m. – 4:30 p.m. and by appointment.

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ERIE STRONG: STRIKING BACK AT COVID-19

From the day Pennsylvania's first COVID-19 cases were announced in early March, our community has been tested as never before.

Suddenly, businesses were shutting down, jobs were in jeopardy and it was hard to find essential supplies at the grocery store. Together with the rest of the country, we were facing an unfamiliar and invisible enemy.

In Harrisburg, the normal business of hashing out a budget was quickly replaced with finding ways to keep our residents safe, our healthcare systems operating, and our community connected to essential services.

I worked to help pass legislation allocating \$50 million to hospitals for additional medical supplies and equipment, suspending requirements for unemployment compensation filing, and authorizing schools to operate remotely.

To help residents cope with household expenses, I worked to pass measures extending the deadline for the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program, postponing the state tax filing deadline, keeping stimulus checks tax free and providing quicker access to property tax and rent rebates.

I also supported bills to make life safer for our frontline essential workers, ensure benefits for first responders and National Guard members impacted by COVID-19, and help our ambulance companies continue operating.

To strengthen health protections, I supported legislation to implement a comprehensive plan for statewide testing – with priority given to first responders and our most vulnerable residents – and a measure to implement universal testing in long-term care facilities and nursing homes.

Helping businesses bounce back

To help our businesses get back on their feet, I supported legislation to provide low- or no-interest emergency assistance loans to small businesses.

As Erie remained in the yellow phase of the state's reopening plan, I voted for legislation to allow online car sales, permit certain real estate transactions to resume, allow restaurants with outdoor seating to reopen with adherence to safety guidelines, and permit outdoor sportsman clubs and shooting ranges to reopen.



In early June, my colleagues and I held a rally calling on the governor to move Erie to the green reopening phase of the state's reopen plan.

I have also stood up for our business community when I believed safety-related mandates would create more harm than good. In early June, my colleagues and I held a rally and wrote to the governor demanding that he move Erie to the green phase of the state's reopening plan.

In July, after the governor announced a rule ordering restaurants and bars to reduce indoor capacity to 25%, I spoke out again, calling on the administration to lift what I considered an arbitrary and unduly restrictive measure that would threaten the survival of these key businesses.

Through it all, Erie residents and small business owners stood shoulder to shoulder, working to flatten the curve of new cases and keep our economy open. None of the progress would have been possible without the resilience, strength and compassion of our people.

Once again, I am reminded of how proud I am to represent a community that is Erie Strong.

**Erie City Hall – Closed • Summit Township – Appointment Only
Millcreek Township – Lobby Service Only**

Putting a public face on government boards

Transparency goes hand-in-hand with democracy.

Citizens need to be able to trust that their elected officials are acting in the people's best interests when they are spending tax dollars and making decisions that affect lives. That can't happen, however, when decisions take place behind closed doors, where special interests can poison the process.

Unfortunately, that's a very real danger when government authorities slip under the radar because the makeup of their boards is not publicized. To address this problem, I plan to introduce legislation that would require all political subdivision and municipal authorities to maintain public websites containing:

- ✓ each board member's name and email contact.
- ✓ the length of their term and when it expires.
- ✓ the name and office of the person who appointed them.

Pennsylvanians have a right to know more about these decision-makers whose actions can carry broad consequences. I believe publishing this information is a good step in the right direction.

Help with housing costs



The CARES Rent Relief and Mortgage Assistance programs can help if you are at least 30 days overdue on your rent or mortgage. Homeowners may qualify for up to \$1,000 per month for a maximum of six months of assistance for the period between March 1 and Nov. 30. Renters may qualify for up to \$750 per month for a maximum of six months assistance for the same period.

Visit www.phfa.org to learn if you are eligible and to apply. You can also call the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency toll-free at 1-855-U-Are-Home.



Joining my colleague, Rep. Joanna McClinton, in the House chamber.

A way to thank our first responders

Our healthcare professionals and first responders have been on the front lines for us 24/7 throughout this pandemic, working tirelessly to save lives – even when doing so jeopardizes their own health and the health of their families. Although they may appreciate our thanks, there are also small things we can do to give back.

As a member of the House Game and Fisheries Committee, I am introducing legislation with fellow committee member Rep. Bill Kortz that would allow healthcare workers and first responders to pay just \$1 for one-year hunting and fishing licenses.



As a member of the House Game and Fisheries Committee, I am committed to helping residents enjoy our amazing outdoors.



Department of Health officials Andy Pickett (center) and Ray Barishansky (bottom) joined me to answer residents' questions at our virtual Q&A COVID-19 forum.



Better policing in progress

I recently voted for two bills – signed into law by the governor in July – that promise to improve police hiring and training.

The first requires law enforcement agencies to disclose employment information requested by another law enforcement agency conducting a pre-hiring background check. If the first agency refuses to do so, a court can compel the information.

The law also establishes a database of separation records so that agencies can learn of potential red flags before hiring an officer who has separated from another agency.

A second new law requires officers to receive training on interacting with people of diverse racial, ethnic and economic backgrounds; on the use of force and de-escalation methods; and on identifying and reporting child abuse. The law will also require that officers be evaluated for post-traumatic stress after a lethal use-of-force incident.

Around the District



At the NWPA Innovation Beehive in February, I got the scoop from talented folks at Gannon and Mercyhurst universities.



Above: It always feels great to shop at the Little Italy Farmers Market (run by the Sisters of St. Joseph Neighborhood Network) and support our local farmers!



Right: Participants told us our Feb. 26 Senior Caregiver Seminar was very informative!



Below: In March, I helped break ground on the future Crime Victim Center of Erie County's Sexual Assault Response Center, which will be open 24/7 and serve victims free of charge.



Enjoying a February visit to the LECOM Center for Health and Aging. Erie's attuned seniors always keep me up to date on what issues I need to take back to Harrisburg.





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By the numbers – dollars back to the district

In late May, my colleagues and I passed legislation allocating \$2.6 billion in federal CARES Act funding. As of early August, Erie has received nearly \$50 million in funding, including:

- ✓ \$24.3 million to the county to help cover the costs associated with coronavirus prevention, protection and treatment.
- ✓ \$13.6 million to LECOM Health and UPMC Community Provider Services to improve infection-prevention practices and expand testing in long-term care facilities.
- ✓ nearly \$8.7 million to ensure public school students have the resources they need to continue learning safely, and more than \$800,000 to our local universities and technical schools to implement COVID-19 safety plans.
- ✓ more than \$1 million to help childcare providers reopen safely.
- ✓ \$220,000 to help food banks meet greater demand.
- ✓ \$155,000 for law enforcement preparedness and safety.

In addition to the CARES Act funding, we secured nearly \$1.2 million in state funding earlier this year, including:

- ✓ nearly \$650,000 to address community violence, bolster school security and help prevent on-campus sexual assault at universities.
- ✓ \$235,000 to provide students with internships and real-world, job-based learning.
- ✓ more than \$101,000 in state grants to local fire and EMS companies.
- ✓ more than \$100,000 to expand computer science in Erie schools.
- ✓ \$100,000 to help longstanding area employer Hoffman Industrial Co. power back up.

Filing for a property tax or rent rebate? My office can help!

The Property Tax/Rent Rebate Program benefits eligible Pennsylvanians 65 or older, widows and widowers 50 or older, and people with disabilities 18 or older. The income limit is \$35,000 annually for homeowners and \$15,000 for renters, and half of Social Security is excluded.

The deadline to apply has been extended to Dec. 31, and this year, applicants can receive rebates sooner because of a new law permitting the applications to be processed on a first-in, first-out basis.

Please call my office at (814) 455-6319 to set up an appointment – and remember to bring identification, proof of age and income, and a copy of your 2019 rent statement or receipt of property taxes paid.



My talented staff can help you file for a property tax or rent rebate!



In January, we wore blue and passed a package of bills to help stop human trafficking. I am continuing to push my bill that would require public restrooms throughout PA to display potentially lifesaving hotline information.