

State Representative

STEVE FONTANA

2005 Legislative Bulletin Serving North Haven



THE STATE BUDGET: ACHIEVING OUR BLUEPRINT FOR CONNECTICUT

In February, the Governor proposed a budget that, like those of her predecessor, 1) underfunded priorities that Connecticut residents overwhelmingly support, and 2) contained an array of gimmicks, cuts, and short-term fixes. We responded by putting forward a fair, balanced, and reasonable budget that increased town aid (including education aid for local schools) and preserved HUSKY health insurance for families of modest means. Ultimately, we collectively settled on a budget that, while accomplishing less than we initially hoped, nevertheless made significant progress in several areas.

First, at our insistence, the budget emphasized the importance of healthy families by restoring HUSKY health coverage for the working poor, ensuring that thousands of children and their families continue to receive quality healthcare.

Second, the budget focused on our children, by providing more funding for education. It makes substantial new investments in school readiness, charter schools, and higher education, reflecting the importance of improving educational opportunity and maintaining our status as one of the most well-educated states in the country.

Third, the budget restored other needed municipal aid, in areas from town aid for road paving to payment-in-lieu-of-taxes programs. As a result, North Haven will receive a state aid increase of more than \$119,000, significantly more than the Governor originally proposed. The budget also extended, for another two years, a temporary increase in the real estate conveyance tax, which brings North Haven annually a few hundred thousand dollars in additional revenue. Finally, to assist homeowners with rising property taxes, the budget increased the property tax credit on the state income tax for income year 2006 to \$400.

To fund the budget, we successfully blocked tax increases on the middle class. Although the Governor proposed regressive “nickel and dime” tax hikes on alcohol and cigarettes, among other measures, we refused to endorse this approach to raising revenue. Instead, we replaced her tax increases with an estate tax on estates valued over \$2 million, and a small surcharge on Connecticut’s corporations.



Dear Friends:

This year, House Democrats made a commitment to the people of Connecticut to improve their quality of life. In January, we developed a “Blueprint for Connecticut,” which outlined our priorities: healthcare, education, municipal aid, and a fair and balanced budget that reaffirmed our support for critical services. We then crafted legislation that reflected our commitment to these priorities.

From our biennial budget to bills on everything from open space protection to small business health insurance expansion, we successfully passed numerous pieces of legislation that put the needs of average citizens and their families first.

This newsletter discusses that budget and other notable achievements. If you would like more information on these or any of our efforts, please call me at 1-800-842-8267 ext. 0182.

As always, I am proud to serve you as your State Representative. Please call me at home (234-2240) anytime if you need help with any state issue.

Best wishes,

Steve Fontana

P.S. For informative interviews with area legislators, please look for my cable TV show “Politics & People” on NHTV!

CALL ME FOR
YOUR COPY OF:

2005 Senior Laws
2005 Education Laws
2005 Major Public Acts
2005 Laws Affecting Children
2005 Laws Affecting Businesses

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TRANSPORTATION & TECHNOLOGY

TRAINING TEEN DRIVERS

To reduce the prevalence of motor vehicle crashes involving young people, we passed new restrictions this year on the privileges of 16- and 17-year-old drivers. We now will prohibit 16- and 17-year-olds from driving between 12:01 AM and 5:00 AM unless they are driving to or from school, a job, a religious activity, or as a result of an emergency. We also will increase the number of behind-the-wheel, on-the-road hours of experience that teens learning to drive under a learner’s permit will need to acquire. Finally, in other legislation, we will ban completely 16- and 17-year-olds from using a cellphone of any type for any reason while driving.



RESTRICTING CELLPHONE USE WHILE DRIVING

The General Assembly passed legislation this year to restrict cellphone use, and to ban the use of other electronic devices (such as pagers, personal digital assistants, video games, and digital cameras), while operating a motor vehicle. Drivers now must use hands-free technology, although they still may turn a cell phone on and off, dial, and answer cell phones manually, and respond to an emergency. Emergency personnel, while performing their official duties, are exempt from the hands-free requirement. The new law also prohibits school bus drivers from using any electronic device while operating buses with passengers on board, and defines any type of distracted driving (such as drinking coffee) as an offense.

LIMITING CELLPHONE DIRECTORIES

To restrict telecommunications companies from unilaterally compiling and distributing directories with the names, numbers, and addresses of their customers, we became one of the first states in the country to protect cellphone customers from being listed in a directory without their consent. The law bars companies from disclosing customer information unless the customer expressly authorizes it, and from refusing to serve a customer who declines to give such authorization.

HEALTH & INSURANCE

EXPANDING SMALL BUSINESS HEALTH INSURANCE

With small business health insurance costs skyrocketing, this year we passed a law to provide greater flexibility in health insurance policies, extend savings to small employers, and increase access to the State Comptroller's small-business MEHIP program. The bill allows the Comptroller and groups that offer similar plans to pool rates for small business customers, potentially bringing down rates by as much as 15%. The bill also allows these small employer plans to account for savings when establishing rates. Finally, the bill extends MEHIP benefits to individuals eligible for retirement benefits and to federally-qualified nonprofits that receive public funds or contract with the state.

EXTENDING HEALTH INSURANCE COVERAGES

Breast cancer annually takes a heavy toll on women and families in our state. This year, we passed legislation to require that insurers cover ultrasound screenings for breast cancer if recommended by a doctor. This legislation makes progress in the effort to promote accurate early detection. We also approved limited legislation to assist women and families who wish to pursue medically necessary infertility diagnosis and treatment with proven effectiveness.



INVESTIGATING PRESCRIPTION DRUG PURCHASING

Prescription drug costs continue to be one of the biggest burdens that Connecticut seniors must bear. This year, we set up a new working group to study how to develop a prescription drug purchasing program, or join an existing program, to help Connecticut residents to purchase less expensive drugs. That group must report to us by January 1, 2006 on their findings.

ENSURING EXTERNAL APPEALS

If you have been denied services or hospitalization by your insurance company and lost your appeal with them, we passed a law to allow you to appeal such denial to the Insurance Commissioner once you have exhausted all internal appeals. Your health insurer also must provide the external appeals forms directly to you.

ENFORCING MANDATORY MOTOR VEHICLE INSURANCE

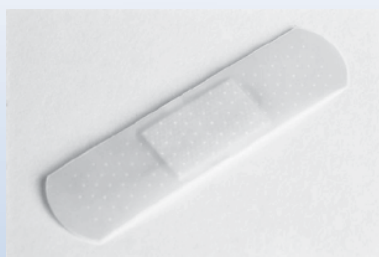
To deter motorists (especially repeat offenders who drop insurance coverage after having just obtained a registration) from driving uninsured, we doubled the civil penalty a vehicle owner must pay to reinstate registration privileges. We also changed the penalty for operating without insurance from a registration cancellation to a suspension. Under this new law, local police will retain their existing authority to seize and impound a vehicle if a motorist operates with a suspended registration, and to pursue potential license suspension.

REFORMING MEDICAL MALPRACTICE INSURANCE

This year, we re-adopted reforms to address rising medical malpractice insurance premiums. We wrote a comprehensive, bipartisan bill that modifies our legal system, and revises Insurance Department and Department of Public Health regulations. While our legislation does not cap non-economic damage awards, it seeks to stabilize premiums by:

- Establishing a continuing education requirement for doctors
- Mandating prior approval of large malpractice insurance increases
- Requiring hospitals to strengthen patient safety practices prior to surgery
- Requiring stricter certification by a physician that grounds exist for negligence of care

If these reforms do not reduce the frequency and amount of awards by 2008, the Insurance Commissioner shall review other alternatives to reduce medical malpractice insurance premiums.



PUBLIC HEALTH

SUPPORTING STEM CELL RESEARCH

This year, we became the third state to invest in human adult and embryonic stem cell research, which proponents believe holds great promise for developing cures to many types of disease and injury. Our bill provides a "safe haven" for stem cell researchers, establishes a regulatory framework for conducting their research, and bans human cloning. The legislation also includes a 10 year, \$100 million funding commitment, designed to keep Connecticut's best and brightest scientific minds here, to attract new ones from around the nation and world, and to promote bio-medical business development.

IMPROVING SCHOOL NUTRITION

Good nutrition is key not only to having a long, healthy life, but also to helping students to learn in the classroom. Since teaching our children to make healthy choices requires offering them healthy options in the school lunch line, we responded to the growing epidemic of obesity by crafting the strongest school nutrition in the nation.

Our bill required healthier drinks and snacks in schools, and provided for a daily minimum period of physical activity of twenty minutes, on top of other physical education requirements. The bill also encouraged school districts to establish School Wellness Committees, to monitor and implement physical activity and nutrition policies.

Unfortunately, despite the growing recognition that certain products contribute to childhood obesity, the Governor vetoed this landmark legislation. I expect that we will bring it back next year for reconsideration.

ENVIRONMENT

CLEANING UP DIESEL EMISSIONS

Diesel fuel emissions contain carcinogens and other toxins that can cause asthma, heart attacks, respiratory disease, and premature death. This year, we tackled the serious health risks from the release of these pollutants into the air we breathe. In our legislation, state agency representatives will develop a plan to reduce diesel emissions from school buses, passenger buses, and trucks.



REDUCING THE THREAT OF PESTICIDES

Since exposure to pesticides can damage developing organs and nervous systems, we protected children's health this year by restricting the use of lawn care pesticides at preschool facilities, elementary schools, and child day care centers. The legislation, however, makes an important exception for the use of pesticides when necessary to eliminate immediate threats to human health, such as mosquitoes, ticks, and other stinging insects.



INCREASING FARMLAND AND OPEN SPACE PRESERVATION

This year, we provided new funding for farmland preservation, open space acquisition, and historic preservation programs. These resources will come from a new fee that towns will collect on each document they record in their land records. In return for collecting this fee, towns will keep a portion of each fee to fund local capital improvement projects.

PROTECTING PUBLIC LANDS

Given the importance of preserving public land (like Peter's Rock here in town), we passed legislation this year to improve enforcement, strengthen fines, and deter littering and vandalism on publicly-owned land. The strengthened fines and surcharges, half of which will go to the municipality in which an arrest occurs, will encourage towns to enforce vandalism and littering laws more strictly.