

## Portion of Governor's Health Care Agenda Set for Introduction

A Democratic Luzerne County lawmaker says he is ready to introduce a portion of Governor Rendell's universal health care package. Todd Eachus said that the bill, which contains the Governor's proposal to put a three percent payroll tax on businesses that don't provide health care, will be introduced early next week.

Eachus indicated that the process for review of the legislation would be a long one.

Eachus says he met recently with members of a small-business group, who told him they're wary of the 3 percent tax. But he says they also made it clear they no longer can afford insurance coverage and worry that their insurance rates might soar if one or more of their employees becomes seriously ill.

Others likewise predict that the health care proposal, expected to be nearly 40 bills in all, would take time.

"When you're talking about universal care, a new tax on businesses and the other changes the Governor wants, you're looking at a substantial legislative effort," one health care lobbyist said.

On the cost side, the Governor is proposing reductions in overall spending on medical care by requiring health care providers to reduce medical errors and infections that strike hospital patients. The plan also aims to mandate better preventive care and care for people with chronic conditions.

## Wrestling with Budget Shortfall Center of House D's Agenda

House Democrats, who snatched majority control of the House after the November elections, outlined a legislative agenda this week for the two-year legislative session that started in January. The agenda announcement came just a day after the full House approved significant changes in its floor and committee operations.

Democratic Leaders, House Majority Leader Bill DeWeese (Greene) and Whip Keith McCall (Carbon) said that Governor Rendell's health-care package, long-term care plan, education plan and alternative energy package, will be introduced and referred to appropriate committees.

"Once we have those blueprints, we will ask our chairmen to hold hearings and get input on those proposals. But that's not all. In addition, we are asking our chairmen and chairwomen to work on bipartisan solutions to many other issues," McCall said.

Meanwhile, Pennsylvania faces a budget shortfall of up to \$2 billion, the Democratic Leaders said.

McCall said that patching the budget hole has to be the top priority for Democrats

"First and foremost" is dealing with "a budget that's \$1.5 billion to \$2 billion in the red," McCall said at the news conference.

Republicans projected a \$2 billion shortfall early last month, when Democratic Gov. Ed Rendell announced his budget. The state must have a balanced spending plan in place by June 30.

Some of the issues expected to be addressed this session by various House committees, include:

- Commerce – mortgage foreclosures, credit card interest rates;
- Consumer Affairs – cable competition, rate caps under electric deregulation, information security, home improvement contractor regulation, consumer protection;
- Environmental Resources and Energy – alternative and renewable energy, electric deregulation;
- Finance – Governor's business tax reform recommendations, property taxes;
- Gaming Oversight – minority hiring practices, ongoing licensing and enforcement at gaming facilities, community benefit;
- Health and Human Services – Governor's health-care plan;
- Insurance – Governor's health-care plan;
- Intergovernmental Affairs – Cover All Kids, identity theft, information security, internet sales;
- Judiciary – prison overcrowding, prison costs, gun violence, mandatory minimum sentencing;
- Labor Relations – ban on nurse mandatory overtime, minimum wage;
- Liquor Control – direct shipment, package reform, convenience store beer sales;
- Local Government – land use and local government cooperation;
- Professional Licensure – Governor's health-care package;
- State Government – campaign finance reform, improved voter access, Right to Know law;
- Transportation – mass transit and road and bridge funding;
- Urban Affairs – abandoned property and vehicle regulations, urban renewal;