



# Pennsylvania State Grange

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Testimony

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House Finance Committee Hearing

August 15, 2013

Good Morning. I am Carl Meiss, President of the Pennsylvania State Grange. Thank you to Chairman Benninghoff, Chairwoman Mundy and the members of this committee for allowing me to testify on behalf of our organization.

A very brief Grange history will provide background information relevant to this hearing. Immediately following the Civil War, Oliver Hudson Kelley (recognized as the Father of the Grange, Order of the Patrons of Husbandry) was tasked by Isaac Newton, then U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, with travelling throughout the country to identify the needs of farmers. He returned to Washington with the recommendation to form an organization to help farmers develop a more unified voice. Kelley began to pursue this objective and in 1867 received the first dues from a handful of people in the Harrisburg area. However, this was shy of the number he deemed necessary to start a local Grange. Kelley then moved on to Fredonia, New York, where the first local or subordinate Grange in the country was chartered. However, Kelley soon returned to Pennsylvania when Eagle Grange #1 in Lycoming County was founded in 1871. Eagle Grange #1 sits along route 15 south of Williamsport and continues to be active in the local community.

The Grange (which operates under the 501(c) (8) tax status) has evolved from an organization with a solely agricultural focus to one now centering on community service ranging from ongoing projects like the deaf awareness campaign to emergency assistance including the recruitment of work crews to clear debris from farm fields after the Campbelltown tornado and modifying a family's home to meet the needs of a brain damaged child. Further, Granges play

host to an array of groups and activities such as Scouts (Cub Scouts, Boy Scouts, Brownies, and Girl Scouts), 4-H clubs, FFA chapters, blood drives, town hall meetings, rabies clinics, sports practices, and community banquets. While this service is vital to the economic and social health of Pennsylvania communities, it is not easily quantified.

Throughout its history, over 2,000 Grange Halls lined the rural landscape of the Commonwealth. Currently, there are 240. Further, the membership peaked at 82,000 during the mid-twentieth century while today there are 9,000 Grangers in Pennsylvania. Although these figures are alarming, there is good news to share. When I began to work for the State Grange just over 10 years ago, membership was dropping by almost 2,000 per year. That has slowed and for the first time in decades, we may see an increase in membership largely due a resurgence of youth engagement helped along by social media savvy young members.

Eighteen counties in the Commonwealth offer tax exempt status to Grange properties. These include: Allegheny, Beaver, Berks, Butler, Centre, Clarion, Clearfield, Cumberland, Forest, Greene, Huntingdon, Juniata, Northampton, Northumberland, Perry, Potter, Susquehanna, and York. Many Granges in the remaining counties have been forced to sell their properties due to the tax burden and some are delaying sales pending the potential of tax relief. A survey of annual property taxes among Granges shows a typical range of \$500 to \$1500 with a few outliers on either end of the spectrum.

The Pennsylvania State Grange respectfully asks the committee to examine means and ultimately move legislation that would extend tax relief to all Grange properties in the Commonwealth so the rich tradition of Grange community service can continue.

Thank you. May I answer any questions?