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House of Representatives
COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
HARRISBURG

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2016-2017 Budget Testimony

March 10, 2016

Submitted by: Pamela A. DeLissio

My remarks today address the 2015-2016 budget in addition to the 2016-2017 budget. My comments do not focus on any line items in particular. My remarks focus on process. In fact I discuss process at all of my Town Halls – 54 to date within the past 64 months- because as I explain to constituents, you can have the best legislative proposals in the world, but if you cannot negotiate the process it does not matter.

And frankly, in my 5 plus years in office I have often witnessed politics trumping policy with the greater good of our citizens an afterthought, if that. So not only are we dealing with the budget proposal, we are dealing with politics and process – some would say all “tools of our trade”.

There seems to be agreement to the fact that we are in uncharted waters. Uncharted waters sound exciting and adventurous. I like adventure and excitement in my life. However, a budget, whether state, local or federal should not be the source for adventure in the lives of our citizens.

Thank you to all of my colleagues for their efforts to date to negotiate a budget in good faith. We have all expended a great deal of time and energy.

In November of 2015 I wrote to the Governor and the House Leaders asking them to consider mediation.

In early December I shared that correspondence and my call for mediation with all of my colleagues in the House.

I had thoughtful and considerate conversations with both Governor Wolf and Leader Reed about utilizing this method to reach a budget resolution.

I offered the concept of mediation both then and now because in my career experience, when a negotiation has extended for this period of time, and experienced the ups and downs and twists and turns that have happened over the past eight months and continue today, it is time to take a different approach. In fact, in my opinion it is well past time.

And most unfortunately it appears to me that the 2016-2017 discussions will be a "rinse and repeat" of the past eight months.

The Wikipedia website defines mediation as follows:

Mediation is the attempt to help parties in a disagreement to hear one another, to minimize the harm that can come from disagreement, to maximize any area of agreement, and to find a way of preventing the areas of disagreement from interfering with the process of seeking a compromise or mutually agreed outcome.

In the 194th, constituents continue to urge me to find that necessary compromise that will address the structural deficit and fairly and predictably fund public basic education and our critical human services programs.

As a rank and file member of the House I have had discussions with leadership on both sides of the aisle, have talked to colleagues, some of whom I have gotten to know even better in the majority party and convened with my "gal pals" – including gal pals from the majority party on many mornings from the end of October through December as we tried our best to foster the relationships that would permit dialogue that would hopefully lead to a budget resolution.

And as I testify today, March 10, it is clear that we have not yet succeeded.

Mediation is not the admission of weakness or deficiency. It is the recognition that we are in a situation that is unique and without precedent. Regardless of how we got here it is imperative that we find the path forward.

The Pennsylvania Council of Mediators is one resource for identifying and helping members to understand the benefits of mediation in this particular instance.

As a result of legislation passed in the early 1990's mediators have a confidentiality privilege comparable to that enjoyed by social workers, clergy and psychiatrists. This was an important step in protecting a cornerstone of the mediation process. Confidentiality permits the participants in the negotiation to be honest about their concerns, frustrations and ultimately what they are willing to do to reach consensus.

Chairmen Adolph and Markosek, I am calling for mediation because over the past 8 months of the 2015-2016 budget negotiations and since the Governor's budget address presenting the 2016-2017 budget proposal I am concerned that things have been said that cannot be unsaid.

In fact my concern goes back to the evening of June 30th when the Governor vetoed the budget bill and when the majority party held a press conference. By nature I am an optimist, a glass half full kind of person, however everything I heard that night gave me great pause for concern.

As a result of the remarks made that evening by both the Governor and majority party, I held a press conference on July 10th with eleven Human Services agencies that serve the 194th to talk about the impact that a protracted negotiation would create. Also discussed was the need for predictable and sustainable funding as these programs support our most vulnerable citizens and the reduction of funding to these agencies has been well documented.

On August 4th I held a press conference with students representing many of the public schools in the 194th. The students ranging in age from 11 through 18 were articulate and thoughtful in their remarks

regarding the need for equitable and fair funding and what impact a protracted budget negotiation would have on their education.

Sadly these press conferences were prescient as here we are on March 10th with the 2015-2016 School, Tax and Fiscal Code bills yet to be passed by both chambers and my strong concern after hearing some of the testimony over the past three weeks that next year's proposed budget will follow a similar process.

Thank you for your strong consideration of my suggestion for mediation.

It is past time to approach these negotiations differently.