

GOVERNMENT HIGHLIGHTS

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Iran and Saudi Arabia Leaders Confer on Middle East Crises

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran met with Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah on March 3 to discuss the increasingly sectarian and violent crises in the Middle East. The visit was reportedly planned at the request of Iran.

The meeting is being seen as supportive of a separate meeting in Baghdad that included the United States, Iraq, Iran, and Syria for the first time. The American decision to participate in discussions with Iran and Syria was one of the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group.

U.S., Iran, Syria, and Others Meet in Iraq

On March 10, despite previous statements of the Bush Administration that there would be little point to meeting with Iraq and Syria, representatives of the United States, Iraq, Iran, Syria and other countries bordering Iraq, the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, and three international groups met in Baghdad. The purpose of the regional conference was to find ways to end Iraq's sectarian violence and prevent additional conflict. While the meeting was described as constructive, it did not produce any significant answers to the political and religious divides in Iraq and also did not seem to bridge the gap between the U.S. and Iran. U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad said Iraq's neighbors preferred to hold a second regional meeting next month in Istanbul, but Abbas Araghchi, the leader of the Iranian delegation, said it should be in Baghdad.

According to Sudarsan Raghavan of the *Washington Post*, delegates to the regional meeting agreed to form three working groups on security, refugees, and fuel and energy supplies composed of representatives of Iraq's neighbors.

President Approves Increased U.S. Troops

President Bush approved 8,200 more U.S. troops for Iraq and Afghanistan, in addition to reinforcements already ordered to those two countries, according to the White House on March 10. The President agreed to send 4,700 troops to Iraq in addition to the 21,500 he ordered to go in January, primarily to support the increased combat force and to handle a larger number of Iraqi prisoners. He also approved sending an additional 3,500 member brigade to Afghanistan to expedite training of local forces, which doubles his previous troop increase to fight the Taliban.

The troop increases came to light in a letter the President sent to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), while he was on a six-day Latin American tour, requesting \$3.2 billion in emergency funding to pay for the additional units. The funds would pay for 2,400 combat support troops, 2,200 military police officers, and 129 soldiers to serve in provincial reconstruction teams in Iraq. Funds for the troops being sent to Afghanistan would extend a temporary increase of 3,200 troops “for the foreseeable future” and pay for an additional 3,500 member training brigade, which had not been previously announced.

French President Will Not Run Again

Seventy-four year-old French President Jacques Chirac said on March 11 that he would not seek re-election next month, seeming to end a 45-year career in politics. He has served as president since 1995, so his departure is seen as clearing the way for a new generation of politicians. Outside France, Chirac may best be remembered for his denunciation of U.S. policy in Iraq and for his commitment to maintain France’s leading role in international affairs. His successor will face a low-achieving French economy and social and racial tensions in deprived suburbs. Likely successors may be Nicolas Sarkozy of the ruling UMP party, Socialist Segolene Royal, and centrist Francois Bayrou.

Federal Government Developments

House Gathering Votes for Supplemental War Spending Bill

The U.S. Senate and U.S. House of Representatives meet again this week. In the House, Members are trying to work out details of a supplemental military spending bill that not only includes funds for the Iraq War but also a requirement that American troops be brought home by a date certain in 2008. Democratic leaders in the House were working to identify 218 Members who would vote for the \$105 billion bill that would impose strict standards of rest and readiness for the military, establish clear benchmarks for the government of Iraq, and recall the troops. House leadership was reaching out to the 43 members of the conservative Blue Dog Democrats and the 75 or so members of the liberal Out of Iraq Caucus. By the end of last week, Democratic whips believed they had 200 votes for the bill. Markup on the supplemental spending bill is expected this week.

Budget Resolution Markup a Possibility Next Week

The FY2008 budget resolution is expected to come before the House Budget Committee the week of March 19, depending on how long consideration of the supplemental war spending bill will take.

Attorney General and F.B.I. in Hot Water with Congress

Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, including Chairman Patrick J. Leahy (D-VT) and Ranking Minority Member Senator Arlen Specter (R-PA), along with a number

of other legislators, are focusing attention on two recent developments involving the Department of Justice and the F.B.I.

In the first area, Senators are planning hearings on the allegations of several U.S. attorneys who claim they were unfairly dismissed from their positions without justification after they declined to rush corruption investigations into Democrats before last November's Congressional election.

In the second area, the Inspector General (IG) of the Justice Department released a lengthy report stating that over a three-year period ending in 2005, the F.B.I. in many cases impermissibly collected personal information about 52,000 citizens and stored it in an intelligence database that was accessible to nearly 12,000 federal, state, and local law enforcement authorities and to select foreign governments. The IG's report, according to R. Jeffrey Smith of the *Washington Post*, concluded that the F.B.I. collected the data "without systematically retaining evidence that its data collection was legal, without ensuring that all the data it obtained matched its needs or requests, without correctly tallying and reporting its efforts to Congress, and without ferreting out all of its abuses and reporting them to an intelligence oversight board." A primary means of obtaining the information was the national security letter (NSL), which is similar to a subpoena but does not require the approval of a judge and is not made public. Congress made obtaining personal information easier for the F.B.I. after the September 11 attacks, but the number of annual requests increased to 47,000 in 2005, involving 24,937 "U.S. persons" (including citizens and green-card holders) and 27,262 foreigners in the United States. The Inspector General found that the reported numbers from the F.B.I. "significantly" understated the agency's use of national security letters to obtain data. F.B.I. field office data errors were thought to be small compared with what the report described as major abuses by counterterrorism officials at F.B.I. headquarters.

Subsequent to the release of the Inspector General's report and in concert with Congressional concerns about the allegations of partisan firings of U.S. attorneys, U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales agreed to tighten the law for replacing U.S. attorneys and to let Congress hear in oversight hearings from senior department officials who were involved with the ousters. F.B.I. Director Robert Mueller and Gonzales both acknowledged the F.B.I. had broken the law in obtaining personal data. Mueller accepted responsibility for the problems, and both men pledged to fix problems.

Some Members of the Senate, including U.S. Senator Charles Schumer (D-NY), called for Gonzales' resignation saying he put politics above the law. Senator Specter said Gonzales' resignation was a "question for the president and the attorney general."

House Passes "Card Check" Union Legislation

The U.S. House of Representatives on March 1 passed legislation ("The Employee Free Choice Act") by a vote of 241 to 184 that would make it easier for workers to organize unions by removing the right of employers to demand secret-ballot union elections and requiring employers to recognize unions once a majority of workers sign cards saying

they want to organize. If enacted into law—which may be doubtful since President Bush has promised to veto it—it would be one of the most significant revisions of federal labor law in 60 years.

States Get Respite from “Real I.D.” Deadline

The Bush Administration announced on February 28 that states can postpone the scheduled May 2008 debut of a program to toughen security requirements for driver’s licenses by up to 19 months, primarily due to complaints about the cost and potential disruptions. The decision came as the House and Senate were considering legislation to implement remaining recommendations of the September 11 Commission. Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff on March 2 laid out the requirements for states to standardize information to be included on licenses, verify applicants’ citizenship status, and check information such as birth certificates and driver histories with other state and federal databases. Only ID’s that meet the new standard will be acceptable for federal purposes such as boarding airplanes or entering courthouses.

YouTube Launches “You Choose ‘08” Initiative

YouTube on March 1 began a video-sharing site by the name of “You Choose ‘08,” which it is calling a voter education initiative, because it contains the official Web videos of presidential candidates. Viewers are encouraged to post text comments and video responses and to rate candidate-created videos. According to Jose Antonio Vargas of the *Washington Post*, all of the presidential front-runners maintain their own YouTube channels with clips from their own Web sites.

Education Secretary to Convene Summit Meeting on March 22

Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings will hold a summit on March 22 in Washington, D.C. to follow up on recommendations of her commission on higher education. Entitled “A Test of Leadership—Committing to Advance Post-Secondary Education for All Americans,” the summit is expected to bring together about 300 invited participants from higher education, business, and other sectors to develop a list of action items to be implemented by states, universities, and other groups. Neither the agenda nor the invitation list has been made public.

New Senate Competitiveness Bill Introduced

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) and Republican Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) introduced the America COMPETES (Creating Opportunities to Meaningfully Promote Excellence in Technology, Education, and Science) Act last week, the language of which is very similar to last year’s Frist-Reid National Competitiveness Investment Act. Unlike most bills, this one will not be referred to committee, but will be placed directly on the Senate’s legislative calendar. This means that the bill could be called up and acted upon at any mutually agreeable time. Other sponsors of the bipartisan bill are Senators Bingaman, Domenici, Inouye, Stevens, Kennedy, Enzi, Lieberman, Ensign,

Mikulski, Alexander, Nelson (Florida), and Hutchison. Additional co-sponsors are being sought.

The bill would double the federal investment for the National Science Foundation (NSF) over the next four years and for the Office of Science at the Department of Energy over the next decade. It would create a DARPA-modeled research project at the Department of Energy and increase investment for basic research at NASA and other science-related federal agencies. It would also provide grants to states in order to better align elementary and secondary school curriculum with the knowledge and skills needed for the global economy and will strengthen the math and science teaching workforce by recruiting and training teachers to teach in high-need schools. It would expand Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) programs by increasing the number of math, science, and foreign languages AP and IB courses and preparing more teachers to teach these courses. A President's Council on Innovation and Competitiveness would also be established to promote innovation and competitiveness.

House Approves First Innovation Bills

The House Science and Technology Committee on the last day of February marked up four bills to improve competitiveness. Among the measures approved was the "Sowing the Seeds through Science and Engineering Act" (H.R. 363), which is one of a package of innovation bills reintroduced this session by Committee Chairman Bart Gordon (D-TN) following the recommendations in the National Academies' 2005 report, *Rising Above the Gathering Storm*. According to the Association of American Universities (AAU), the bill would:

- Authorize the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the Department of Energy (DoE) to make early-career awards to young scientists and engineers;
- Authorize the NSF Integrative Graduate Education and Research Traineeship Program (IGERT);
- Create a Presidential Innovation Award;
- Establish an office within the President's Office of Science and Technology Policy to set priorities among university and national research infrastructure needs; and
- Recognize NASA's contribution to national innovation.

The other three bills that were approved would improve planning and interagency coordination of high-performance computing research (H.R. 1068), reauthorize funding for aluminum and steel energy conservation research (H.R. 1126), and ensure that energy-saving research is transferred from federal laboratories to actual use (H.R. 85). A committee press release on the four bills is available at: <http://science.house.gov/press/PRArticle.aspx?NewsID=1481>.

Innovation Proclamation to be Issued

U.S. business and higher education leaders will unveil "The American Innovation Proclamation" on March 13 in Washington. The document urges Congress to move

forward on critical legislation that promotes U.S. competitiveness and sustains U.S. innovation leadership. The proclamation has been signed by more than 270 business and higher education organizations and leaders, including the University of Pittsburgh. Speakers at the March 13 ceremony will include Congressman Bart Gordon (D-TN), chairman of the House Science and Technology Committee; Harold McGraw III, Chairman, President and CEO, The McGraw Hill Companies, Inc., and Chairman, Business Roundtable; Norman Augustine, Former Chairman and CEO, Lockheed Martin Corporation; and Robert C. Dynes, President, University of California.

OMB Issues Earmark Guidance

Consistent with the request of President Bush to Congress to reform the earmarking process, the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) on January 25 issued a memorandum to agency heads directing them to identify and catalog earmarks in all FY2005 appropriations bills and some authorization bills, to serve as a baseline. See the memo at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/memoranda/fy2007/m07-09.pdf>.

A timeline in the memorandum has agencies completing their data collection by February 28, OMB conducting its review of the listings by March 7, and OMB posting the information on its public Web site on March 12.

The second memorandum, dated February 15, directs agencies to provide no money in FY2007 for earmarked projects that are mentioned in Congressional reports, documents or other communications, unless the projects also have been authorized specifically by statute. This also applies to earmarks from FY2006. The OMB memorandum is available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/memoranda/fy2007/m07-10.pdf>.

ACE President Announces New RIAA Enforcement Program for Illegal File Sharing

Dr. David Ward, President of the American Council on Education (ACE), at the request of the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), forwarded a letter from RIAA to college and university presidents and chancellors informing them that RIAA plans to file a new round of lawsuits against individuals who engage in illegal peer-to-peer (P2P) file sharing of copyrighted material, including about 400 college students. The new enforcement plan includes a new pre-lawsuit option that would permit alleged infringers to settle with RIAA before a suit is filed. Copies of the ACE newsletter and the RIAA letter are available on the ACE Web site at:

<http://www.acenet.edu/AM/Template.cfm?Section=CEOs&TEMPLATE=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&CONTENTID=20656>.

House and Senate Attention on HEA

Both the House and the Senate spent time last week considering portions of the Higher Education Act (HEA) that must be reauthorized in the next few months. The House Education and Labor Subcommittee on Higher Education, Competitiveness and Lifelong

Learning held the first of what may be every-other-week hearings between now and late spring on HEA, this one on the topics of access to and financing of higher education. House aides said the committee planned to draft a bill to renew HEA by July, with the aim of passing it in September, after Congress returns from its summer recess.

The Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee (HELP) began last week to update S. 1614, the HEA legislation that the Senate panel passed on a bipartisan basis in the 109th Congress. There seems to be significant agreement on this bill from the last Congress, other than on Title IV, student financial aid. The Senate is hoping for a committee markup in early April.

Education Department Scales Back IPEDS Proposal

In a notice published in the March 8 *Federal Register* (72 FR 10502), the U.S. Department of Education announced that it would scale back its recent proposal to significantly expand the information it collects annually from colleges through a federal online database, known as the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Although the notice did not indicate which kind of information the department would forgo, the director of the department's research office, the Institute for Education Sciences, Grover J. (Russ) Whitehurst, said its leaders would almost definitely not ask colleges to report on how they perform on measures of student learning outcomes. According to Whitehurst, it would be inappropriate for the federal government to collect that type of information. Such a data collection “. . . exceeds the response of a federal authority or control to be incentivizing that kind of collection,” Whitehurst noted. The comment period ends March 26.

Other Federal Developments

--Reports from Senate insiders indicate that a time agreement is currently being negotiated by leadership that may bring the Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act (S. 5) to the Senate floor for a vote in the next few weeks.

--The Senate Finance Committee is scheduled to hold a hearing on Wednesday, March 14, on “Charting a Course for Health Care Reform: Moving Toward Universal Coverage.”

--Federal Reserve Chairman Ben S. Bernanke reassured Congress on February 28, the day after Wall Street suffered its steepest decline in nearly four years, that the markets were “working well” and that his view of the economy was unchanged. “We are looking for moderate growth in the economy going forward.” The stock sell-off on February 27 has been attributed to a plunge in Chinese stocks that reverberated across Europe to Wall Street. The Dow Jones Industrial average was down 3.3 percent or 416 points.

--House Budget Committee Chairman John Spratt (D-SC) is expected to unveil his first Congressional budget plan next week and submit it for passage by his committee. The plan will attempt to end a deficit of more than \$200 billion within five years, provide funding for Democratic priorities, and not raise taxes.

--Congressman Henry A. Waxman (D-CA) introduced legislation on March 1 that would nullify an Executive Order signed by President Bush in 2001 limiting public access to presidential documents and greatly expanding the scope of executive privilege. Known as the Presidential Records Act Amendment of 2007, the bill would largely restore the 1978 Presidential Records Act to its form under President Reagan, limit executive privilege to current and former presidents, and set clear and strong standards for the review of documents before their public release. Congressman Waxman is the chairman of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform. The issues in the Waxman bill have recently gained public attention because of the proposed presidential library at Southern Methodist University.

--According to Glenn Kessler of the *Washington Post*, the Bush Administration is “backing away from its long-held assertions that North Korea has an active clandestine program to enrich uranium, leading some experts to believe that the original U.S. intelligence that started the crisis over Pyongyang’s nuclear ambitions may have been flawed.” The chief intelligence officer for North Korea, Joseph R. DeTrani, told Congress on February 27 that there was “high confidence” that North Korea acquired materials that could be used to produce uranium, but only “mid-confidence” that such a program exists in the country.

--A weekend of ceremonies, March 3-4, marked the commemoration of the March 7, 1965 civil rights march in Selma, Alabama. Democratic presidential candidates Senator Barack Obama (D-IL) and Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-NY) both gave significant addresses. Former President Bill Clinton accompanied his wife, his first major public appearance with her since she announced her presidential campaign.

--An advisory panel to the Food and Drug Administration recently recommended approval of the Sanofi Aventis bird flu vaccine for humans, despite evidence that the shots will not protect most people and concerns about its safety. The vaccine will not be sold commercially, but will be purchased and stockpiled by the federal government with enough doses for 20 million people.

--Due to a “hold” imposed by an unnamed Senator, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence chaired by Senator John D. “Jay” Rockefeller IV (D-WV) was not able to pass the Intelligence Authorization Bill last week. The committee chair called the delay “one of the more embarrassing efforts I have been associated with in my 24 years in this body.” Rockefeller and Senator Christopher “Kit” Bond (R-MO), the ranking minority member, have been working over several months to address concerns expressed by Members to the bill the committee passed last May. With the agreed-upon revisions, the measure was reintroduced January 27 and put on the unanimous consent calendar on February 8. Senators may anonymously put a “hold” on a bill, stalling progress. The publication *Congressional Quarterly* on March 7 said that Senator Jim DeMint (R-SC) was the member who put the bill on hold reportedly due to White House objections to specific provisions, including public disclosure of the national intelligence budget; a requirement for a report on secret CIA prisons; and response to information requests by the committee chairman and vice chairman within 30 days.

--The U.S. Department of Transportation is expected to propose new rules for how airline passengers may carry lithium batteries used to power laptop computers and cell phones, following a rash of fires on planes.

--Congress is considering the reauthorization of the State Children's Hospital Insurance Plan (SCHIP), a program that uses federal and state money to subsidize health coverage for families with incomes too high to qualify for Medicaid, but too low to afford private insurance. The program expires September 30. Senator Max Baucus (D-MT), chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, has proposed an additional \$50 billion over five years for the program, double the \$5 billion a year proposal of the Bush Administration.

People on the Move

--President Bush appointed nine individuals to a new oversight commission to review the military's health care system, prompted by allegations from two *Washington Post* reporters of squalid conditions and bureaucratic delays related to the care of outpatients at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. The commission appointees are former Senator Bob Dole (R-KS); former secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala; Kenneth Fisher, chairman of a nonprofit organization that assists with housing for veterans; Dr. C. Martin Harris, chief information officer at the Cleveland Clinic; Edward A. Eckenhoff, president of the National Rehabilitation Hospital in Washington; Gail R. Wilensky, an economist and senior fellow at Project HOPE, an international health education foundation; Marc Giammatteo, a Harvard student and former Army captain; Jose Ramos, a Navy medic who treated soldiers injured in Iraq; and Tammy Edwards, a research assistant at the Geneva Foundation which promotes the advancement of military medicine. Ms. Edwards' husband was wounded in Iraq. The panel was given a June 30 deadline to report its recommendations.

--The commander of Walter Reed Army Medical Center has been changed for a third time in two weeks. It is now Major General Eric B. Schoomaker, formerly the commander of the Army Medical Research and Materiel Command at Ft. Detrick, Maryland. The Army's Surgeon General, Lt. General Kevin C. Kiley, who recently had been commander at Walter Reed, announced his retirement.

--I. Lewis (Scooter) Libby, former chief of staff to Vice President Dick Cheney, was found guilty by a Washington jury of four of five felony charges related to perjury, making false statements, and obstruction of justice. He faces a likely prison term of one and a half to three years when he is sentenced on June 5 for concealing his role in the leak of undercover CIA officer Valerie Plame's identity to the news media. It is possible that Libby may not go to prison until all appeals are exhausted.

--U.S. Senator John McCain on February 28 told the David Letterman "Late Show" audience that he will join the 2008 presidential race and will formally announce his candidacy in April.

--U.S. Congressman Patrick Murphy (D-PA) is the only Member of Congress who is a veteran of the war in Iraq. He recently returned from his first trip back to Iraq since his 2003-2004 tour of duty as a paratrooper with the Army's 82nd Airborne Division.

--Former U.S. Senator Fred D. Thompson (R-TN), who now plays District Attorney Arthur Branch on the NBC television drama "Law and Order," said on March 11 that he is giving some thought to a possible presidential race.

Local and Commonwealth Government Developments

Summer on the Susquehanna

The Pennsylvania General Assembly and Governor Ed Rendell have not yet debated the Administration's \$27.3 billion budget request for 2007-08, but some legislative employees are already being told to brace themselves for a long summer. In an e-mail message sent to legislative employees last week, Senate Secretary Mark Corrigan warned his staff not to schedule any vacation in July and August, and urged them to save their money in case lawmakers and the Administration blow the June 30 budget deadline.

In addition to the Secretary's office, which is a clearinghouse for Senate legislation, Mr. Corrigan oversees dozens of other Capitol employees, including the Capitol tour staff, the Senate pages, Senate security and other legislative support personnel. He is an independent Senate employee and reports to both the Republican and the Democratic caucuses. In his memo, Corrigan reminded his staff that they are not allowed leave while the Senate is in session. He warned them to "not even think of coming to me in July or August with a tale of woe about the deposit you will lose on the shore house you have reserved." Reflecting earlier standoffs when Senate employees briefly went unpaid, Corrigan told his staff some workers had to take out short-term loans to make ends meet until lawmakers and the governor reached an accord.

Senate and House Republican leaders have so far been cool to Governor Rendell's budget, with its 3.6 percent increase over current spending of \$26.1 billion. During budget hearings in both chambers last week, administration officials faced tough questions from lawmakers. In addition, GOP bosses in the Senate have already put the Democratic administration on notice that they are opposed to several of the Governor's major initiatives. These initiatives include a three percent payroll tax on employers to fund Governor Rendell's proposal to extend health benefits to nearly 800,000 adults, as well as a plan to boost the state sales tax from six percent to seven percent — and from seven percent to eight percent in Philadelphia and Allegheny County — to help pay for property tax reductions for homeowners.

Details of Authority Audit Released

Disclosing the results of a recent audit, state Auditor General Jack Wagner reported that management pension provisions at the Port Authority are "lucrative and excessive" and are a cause of the financially troubled transit agency's problems. Mr. Wagner released

details of an audit his office is conducting on Port Authority spending, particularly in management. A month ago, Mr. Wagner released another interim report that concluded the agency could save money by moving from its rented offices in the Heinz 57 Center, Downtown, to its former offices in Manchester.

Among the findings in the interim report are that managers are permitted to buy back service years for their pensions from other public employers; retired managers get an extra \$500 a month until age 62 at an annual \$6,000 cost; and 44 current and recently retired Port Authority managers have been able to earn lump sum pension payments while still working.

The auditor general's office released the findings before the entire audit is completed so that the management costs could be included in the calculation of the Port Authority's proposed service cuts as a way to save money and preserve transit access.

Young Drivers Targeted in Proposed Legislation

Newly proposed legislation could keep distractions away from Pennsylvania's teen drivers. State Representative Craig Dally (R-North Hampton) has introduced a bill regulating teen driving. His bill would ban the use of cell phones for drivers with a learner's permit or junior license. State Representative John Siptroth (D-Pike/Monroe) contends the problem is less experienced drivers tend to be more easily distracted. Representative Siptroth said he would support a law requiring the use of a headset as Pennsylvania does not have a law requiring a hands-free device while driving.

This year, State Representative Josh Shapiro (D-Montgomery) will re-introduce a bill that would make it a primary offense to drive while on a hand-held cell phone. Hands-free headsets would be allowed and exceptions would be made for police and emergency vehicle drivers, and for motorists who fear for their safety or are making a 911 call. The bill did not make it out of committee last year. State Representative Katherine Watson (R-Bucks) has proposed another bill that would allow no more than one other passenger for 16- and 17-year-old drivers unless they are siblings from the same household or are farm workers on the job. Young drivers would need 65 hours of behind-the-wheel training, with 10 hours of night driving and five hours of bad weather driving experience. That is an increase from the current 50 hours required.

A watchdog group, Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety, recently released results from a nationwide study of driving rules in each state. The group wants three laws enacted covering teen drivers in Pennsylvania: a cell-phone ban, stricter limits on passengers, and a 10 p.m. curfew. For older drivers, the group advocates some kind of restriction for driver cell phone use.

PHEAA Releases Spending ... Sort Of

According to recently released documents, the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency's (PHEAA) spending includes chartering a jet, spending \$900,000 on board trips

to resorts and funding an employee's tuxedo rental. Those expenditures finally came into view after three news organizations - The Associated Press, the Harrisburg *Patriot-News* and WTAE-TV in Pittsburgh - prevailed in a 29-month legal battle to obtain spending - related documents from PHEAA. The travel between 2000 and 2005 included board trips to resorts in California's Napa Valley, Maryland's Eastern Shore, Virginia and West Virginia. Sixteen of PHEAA's 20 board members are elected state legislators.

Stories by the *Patriot-News* and The Associated Press however, report that it is practically impossible to get a full handle on how PHEAA spent public money. Apparently 13,470 pages of documents made available for review were stripped of information- with PHEAA explaining it was protecting "trade secrets" - and were randomly arranged. The AP is reporting that 30 PHEAA lawyers were involved in redacting personal data and "trade secrets" that included out-of-town travel destinations that PHEAA says would reveal confidential business contacts.

PHEAA receives \$500 million a year in state funding to disburse as student aid, and its operating expenses, which totaled \$261 million last year, are paid for out of its for-profit loan business earnings. PHEAA has 2,700 employees.

Senator Calls for Public Safety Agency

Senator Jeff Piccola (R-Dauphin) will introduce a bill that would create a Department of Public Safety. The agency would have oversight of nine Commonwealth agencies with missions in law enforcement, public safety and emergency response. Senator Piccola's goal is to have a single point of command for state response to any crisis, whether it is reacting to a storm, a prison break or a nuclear accident. The proposal would bring the state police, the state Department of Corrections, the Board of Probation and Parole, the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency and five smaller agencies under the umbrella of a Department of Public Safety. Divisions of other agencies, such as the state Department of Transportation, that have public safety-related duties would also be subject to the Public Safety secretary's command during a disaster.

Senator Piccola says creating the agency is the best way to solve the chain-of-command problems revealed in the state's response to the Valentine's Day snowstorm. Among the criticism of the storm response has been the seeming lack of decisiveness across agencies in moving to close ice-packed roads as the storm worsened, and poor execution in keeping motorists from entering highways once they were closed. As a result, hundreds of motorists were left stuck overnight on an ice-covered stretch of Interstate 78.

The new department would have an ongoing emergency planning and preparedness function and fold in the state's homeland security office. Other states have moved to a department of public safety model in recent years, especially since the 2001 terrorist attacks. According to a Senate staff analysis, 30 states have some form of a public safety office in their executive branch.

Relief on the Way?

Tax relief is on the way for senior citizens. Younger Pennsylvanians also could benefit from slots gaming this year, but only if the state can certify on April 15 that revenue will reach \$500 million by October 15. If the goal is met, \$100 million would be held back in an escrow account while the rest could be used to reduce property tax bills. The Gaming Board now has on hand about \$143 million in license fees and slots revenue that will count toward the \$500 million.

By law, another \$200 million must go toward expanding property tax and rent rebate programs for senior citizens, widows, widowers and disabled residents. That money is guaranteed to be distributed even if revenues fall short of \$500 million. Help could come soon from \$250 million in one-time licensing fees for five stand-alone casinos that recently were approved to open. However, if unsuccessful bidders for those licenses file appeals, there could be delays in collecting the fees. Any broad-based tax relief this year would amount to less than \$100 for most property owners, gaming officials said.

Pittsburgh Casino Delayed

The opening of Pittsburgh's slot machine casino has been pushed back to the summer of 2008 because of delays in issuing the formal license for the North Shore facility. Detroit businessman Don Barden originally had hoped to open the casino in March 2008. That timetable, however, is no longer viable because of the length of time it took for the state gaming control board to issue its formal order on the Pittsburgh license and because of the subsequent 30-day appeal process, which did not end until March 12. These delays were not anticipated when Mr. Barden was awarded the license on December 20.

The two losing bidders for the Pittsburgh license, Forest City Enterprises and Isle of Capri Casinos Inc., have filed appeals. PITG Gaming, Mr. Barden's company, cannot start construction or complete the purchase of the land the casino will sit on until the appeal period has expired and the license is issued.

County Dems Endorse Candidates

Mayor Luke Ravenstahl scored a decisive win over City Councilman Bill Peduto for the Democratic endorsement for Mayor last week. More than 1,800 Democratic Party committee members and candidate supporters from Allegheny County gathered throughout the day in the IBEW union hall in the South Side to vote to support candidates for Pittsburgh City Council, City Controller, Allegheny County Council, Pittsburgh Public School Board, Common Pleas Court and Sheriff. Ravenstahl received 602 votes to Peduto's 163.

In the past 30 years, two mayoral candidates who did not get the Democratic Party's endorsement went on to defeat the favored candidate: Sophie Masloff beat then-City Controller Tom Flaherty in 1989 and Richard Caliguiri defeated Tom Foerster, the long-

serving County Commissioner, in 1977. Among city races, the May primary virtually decides who will win the general election in November because registered Democratic voters outnumber Republican voters in the city by a margin of 5-to-1.

In other county races: County Councilwoman Joan Cleary of Brentwood lost to John Palmiere; Councilwoman Brenda Frazier of Stanton Heights lost to Matt Arena; and Councilman William Lestitian of Brookline fell to Jim Ellenbogen. Councilman Bob Macey beat challenger Jay Jabbour.

Acting county Sheriff William Mullen defeated challenger Anthony Costa. Voters will have the chance to eliminate Mullen's job in a referendum on the May 15 primary ballot.

Incumbents on Pittsburgh City Council fared well, as Twanda Carlisle was the only incumbent to lose the endorsement. She lost to Rachel Cooper, 22, of Homewood, a recent Howard University graduate. In the three-way race for city controller, Allegheny County Prothonotary Michael Lamb edged acting Controller Anthony Pokora by one vote thanks to a last-minute recount and two provisional ballots. Pokora indicated he may challenge the results in court. City Councilman Doug Shields, who received the endorsement in his council race, placed a distant third in the controller's race.

Democratic Party Endorsements:

Mayor

Luke Ravenstahl

Pittsburgh City Council

District 1: Incumbent Darlene Harris

District 3: Incumbent Jeffrey Koch

District 5: Incumbent Douglas Shields

District 7: Incumbent Len Bodack

District 9: Rachel Cooper

Pittsburgh City Controller

Allegheny County Prothonotary Michael Lamb

Allegheny County Council

District 6: John Palmiere

District 9: Bob Macey

District 12: Jim Ellenbogen

District 13: Matthew Arena

Common Pleas Judge

Four seats available (listed in order of votes received):

Michael McCarthy

Arnie Klein

Jack McVey

Wrenna Watson

Pittsburgh Public School Board

District 2: Stephanie Tecza

District 6: Sherry Hazuda

Other offices

Allegheny County Chief Executive: Dan Onorato

Allegheny County Sheriff: William Mullen

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