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January 13, 1998

# UNITY COALITION OF THE POCONOS

**Robert C Hillman, Chairman**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee on Crime and Corrections, I wish to thank you for affording me the opportunity to speak to you about House Bill 1880. The Unity Coalition Of The Poconos, of which I am Chairman, is one of the organizations that initially requested this Bill be introduced and passed into Law. We are very pleased to see the process started which we hope will end with House Bill 1880 becoming a Law in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. We are also very pleased that we can be a part of that process.

House Bill 1880 stipulates that a person commits a misdemeanor of the second degree when he wears a mask, hood or device by which any portion of the face is so hidden, concealed or covered as to conceal the identity of the wearer and is upon any public way or public property or upon the private property of another without the written permission of the occupier of the property to do so. The Bill excludes those who wear traditional holiday costumes on the occasion of the holiday; people who wear a mask for protection at work or while playing sports; and for other situations covered in the Bill. However, the Bill does not allow for nonapplicability to those who traditionally have worn a veil or "mask" to cover their face as a result of their religious beliefs. We feel that this is an oversight that should be corrected before the Bill becomes Law.

I have talked with a number of people from many communities across the Commonwealth, who have attended public meetings and events in support of Unity that were also attended by members of a Hate Groups wearing their robes and hoods. These people, who were usually elderly, frail, or who had small children with them, tell me of how they had to leave the meeting because they felt so afraid and were intimidated by the faceless figures. They told me that the men in hoods had come into the meeting and stood along the wall staring at them. They could only see the eyes looking out from behind the hood, eyes that they perceived as being filled with hate and evil. Because of the fear that this caused in them, they would get up and leave the meeting. Some of the people were crying as they told me their reason for having to leave. Most of these people were not African-American or members of other minority groups in their community. They were white, they were elderly, they lived alone, they had small children, and they were very much afraid of the hooded, nameless, faceless people standing along the wall. The State of Georgia has had an anti-masking law for over 40 years. In 1990 Georgia's Supreme Court Chief Justice upheld the law as constitutional and made the

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following statement while doing so: "A nameless, faceless figure strikes terror in the human heart. But remove the mask and the nightmarish form is reduced to its true dimensions. The face betrays not only identity but also human frailty."

We live in a great Nation, that has a Constitution and Laws that protect our rights and freedoms. However, Freedom has its limits and that is usually the point where one persons actions infringe on the rights of others. For example, I have the right to through a rock, but I don't have the right to through that rock at another person or through that person's window. People have the right to smoke cigarettes. Others have the right not to have to inhale secondary smoke. People smoking in areas occupied by non-smokers had become a major concern in many areas of this country. Smokers wanted to exercise their right to smoke and Non-Smokers wanted to exercise their right to be in a smoke free environment. Today, people still have the right to smoke. But they are prohibited from smoking in U.S.Government Buildings, on most Airlines and in many other public and private places where their smoke might be inhaled by others. These Anti-Smoking laws, regulations and guidelines relating to where people can and can't smoke had to be passed in order to establish the limits of acceptable public behavior.

Although there is currently no law in Pennsylvania that prohibits the wearing of a hood or mask in public places, I asked the Chief of Police in my community "what would be the effect of someone going to their local Bank to cash a check, if they were to ware a hood over their head that only allowed their eyes to be seen. Would the person be breaking any law?" His response was No, but they could be putting themselves and others in danger. Because they enter the Bank wearing a hood, the security guards or other bank employees would likely mistake them for a person who is intending to rob the bank. The alarms would likely be activated and police officers would respond.

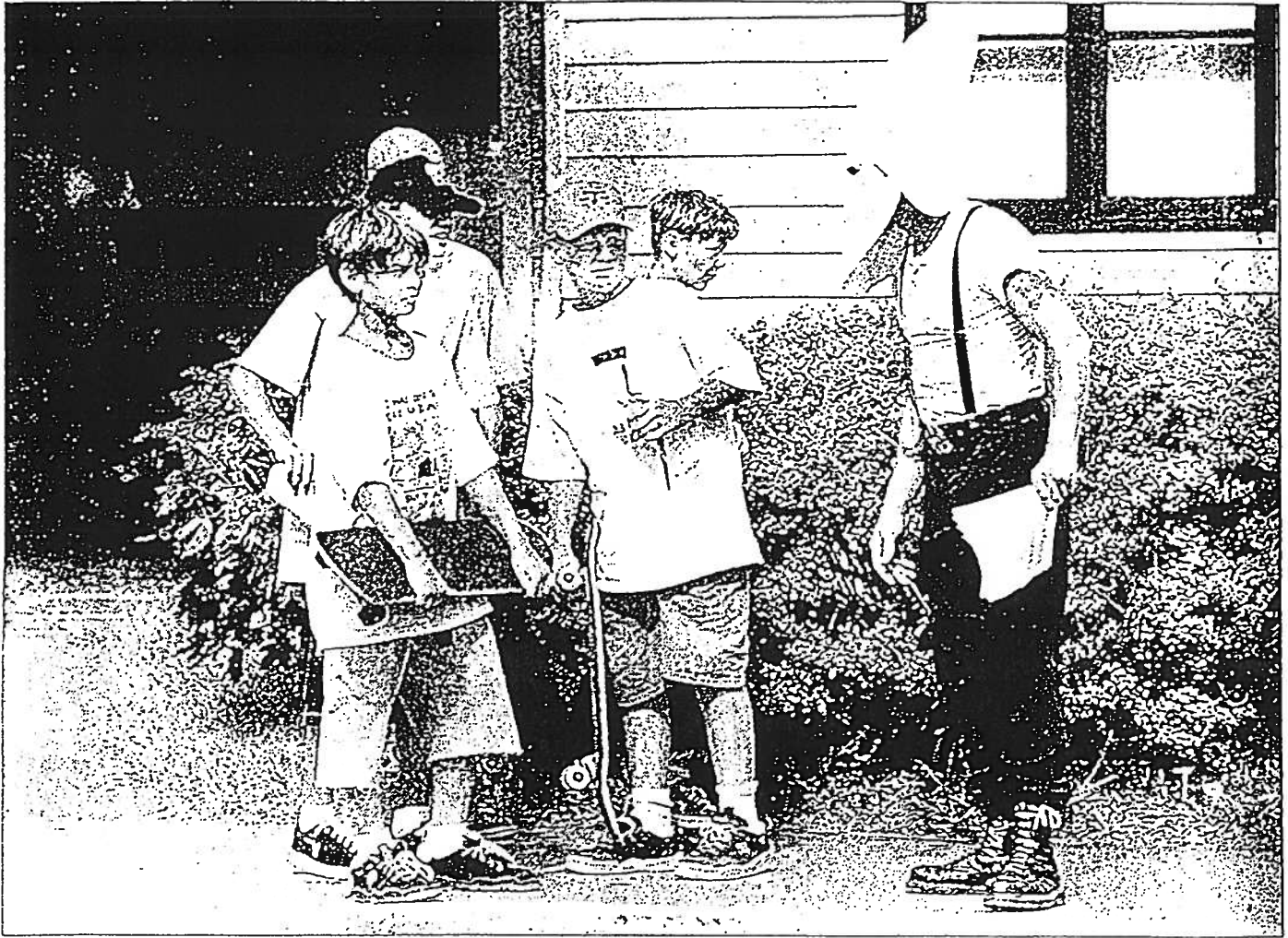
When I was a child I used to notice while watching TV that the bad guy would cover his face with a mask or hood before going in to stick-up the bank, rob the train, or shoot someone from ambush. I also noted, while listen to the Lone Ranger on radio or watching him on TV, that he always had to tell the people that he came across not to be afraid of his mask and that he was on the side of law and order. He said that he wore the mask to protect his identity from being known by the members of the gang that killed his brother and tried to kill him. Because of this I and many many other people in Pennsylvania and across the United States have formed a Core Belief and come to equate the wearing of a mask with the picture of someone who is out to do us harm, who is evil and who is to be feared. An example of "Core Belief"

would be: If you are looking out of your window one afternoon and you see a car pull up in front of your house. Two strangers wearing mask get out of the car and start walking towards your door. You would most likely make sure that your door is locked, you may call the police, or take other actions to protect your family and property. The two people have not broken any Law and you do not know why they are coming to your door. But you are concerned or even afraid because of the mask covering their faces. Many of us have over the years developed a belief that a person wearing a mask or hood to hides their identity is most likely going to do us harm and we respond to them accordingly. I have been told that members of hate groups such as the KKK ware hoods to protect their identity and to keep them from being discriminated against by those who may not agree with their views and actions. This, like smoking cigarettes, is their right and we have no problem with this reason for wearing the mask. We do question why someone would join an organization of which they are ashamed to be identified as members. But that is their right. However, we do have a problem with hate groups and other gangs or individuals who use the hood or mask to intimidate and cause fear in the hearts and minds of others.

Many African American, Jewish, Asian-American, Latino and other people across this Commonwealth and across the United States have been intimidated, beaten and even killed by people who are allowed to hide their identity behind a hood or mask. Many elderly and frail people have been intimidated into not attending or leaving public meetings and events because of hooded, faceless figures staring at them and striking terror in their hearts and mind.

Freedom is truly a great thing and it should be protected by all of us. It is understood by most of us that our rights and freedoms are limited to the point where they infringe on the rights and freedoms of others. Most of us understand this and try not to infringe on the rights of others. There are also those in our Commonwealth who are not willing to consider the rights of others and for those people Laws have to be passed to clarify the limits of acceptable public behavior. The members of the Unity Coalition Of The Poconos and many other people across Pennsylvania see House Bill 1880 as doing just that.

ROBERT C. HILLMAN



Local skateboarders meet up with a leafing member of the Ku Klux Klan in Brentwood yesterday

Matt R. Post-Gazette

