

**Representative Rick Mirabito, 83rd Legislative District
Testimony House Committee on Appropriations
March 8, 2012**

Good afternoon Chairman Adolph and Chairman Markosek and the other members of the House Committee on Appropriations.

Thank you for providing the opportunity for me to speak to you on behalf of the people of the 83rd Legislative District. One-half of the population of the 83rd District lives in Williamsport, a third-class city located in Lycoming County in north central Pennsylvania, and the rest live in eight other townships and boroughs surrounding Williamsport.

When I spoke with you a year ago, we emphasized how state budget cuts hurt education in rural communities and shifted the tax burden to property owners. I am disheartened to tell you that we have the same problems before us as we address the 2012-2012 budget.

I have learned two lessons from these budget debates. First, although we may try to reduce state spending, the problems in our communities do not go away. Second, we need to recognize that rural and urban communities are fundamentally

different in their economic structure; put simply, they are poorer and less able to sustain massive state cuts in funding.

Today I want to address these issues in the context of how budget cuts in rural communities affect education, public transportation for the most vulnerable of our citizens, and State Police functions.

RURAL COMMUNITIES ARE FUNDAMENTALLY DIFFERENT

When we analyze the situation facing many of our rural communities, we see that they are fundamentally different from the more affluent parts of our state. In fact, they share many of the problems and economic struggles of our urban areas.

For example, if we look at the 83rd Legislative District and Lycoming County, we see a stark comparison with the rest of the state. Thus, the statewide median household income is approximately \$50,398. But Lycoming County's median household income is \$42,689 --- a full 15.3% lower.

And in the third-class city of Williamsport, our median household income is only in the range of \$28,000 --- a level that compares with sections of Pennsylvania's larger urban communities. As you know, this means that one-half of our households are living on less than \$28,000 per year. We have similar median incomes in the more rural parts of Lycoming County.

Part of the reason our household incomes are lower is that we have fewer individuals with higher education. Thus, statewide 26.4% of persons over the age of 25 have a bachelor's degree, but in Lycoming County only 18.8% have this same level of education.

Finally, while statewide we have 12.4% of the population living below the poverty level, in Lycoming County we have 14.4% living below the poverty level.

Because the rural and urban areas of our state are poorer, we rely more on state help in the areas of education and transportation. As you can imagine, it is difficult to own and maintain a car on a median income of \$28,000. And yet, we have a large distance to travel within these rural communities to get to jobs, school and healthcare facilities.

EDUCATION FUNDING CRITICAL TO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Your committee has heard from a number of entities regarding state funding for education. My constituents continue to tell me that education is a fundamental tool to foster economic development, and that a skilled workforce is essential to meet the needs of existing businesses and to entice businesses to come to Pennsylvania.

My constituents also tell me that the proposed budget does not adequately invest in Pennsylvania's future in the area of education. While we all know that simply throwing money at education will not improve it, we should also know that stripping resources from schools will not advance the quality of education either.

Last year the massive cuts to public education fell most heavily on our rural and urban school districts. This appears to be happening again this year. Under this budget, school districts may be forced to decide whether to keep pre-school and kindergarten programs. These are programs which have proven to be very effective in the area of early childhood learning, but we have not made them a priority in the state budget.

Early education is not an option for us in rural communities; it is an imperative. Early childhood programs do not only help poor children; they help children from all socio-economic classes. Our children in rural communities need the benefits of pre-school and kindergarten in order to grow into contributing citizens and to be able to compete in a global economy.

In addition, under this budget school districts will be forced to pay for cyber and charter schools without any state assistance. This policy puts more pressure on school districts. The cuts in education that have occurred in our rural communities over the last two years are particularly devastating. For example, the per-student cuts for school districts in the 83rd Legislative District for two years include:

- \$275 per student or \$6,875 per classroom cut for Loyalsock Township School District;
- \$578 per student or \$14,450 per classroom cut for South Williamsport Area School District; and
- \$720 per student or \$18,000 per classroom cut for the Williamsport Area School District. By the way, the Williamsport Area School District has a poverty ratio of 62%.

Constituents in the 83rd District are concerned that, even as school districts try to cut back on spending, fixed overhead costs will force local property tax increases on struggling homeowners and retirees. For example, when oil reaches \$100 a barrel, the effects permeate through the entire economy --- including school district budgets.

Thus, while some may say that there is no tax increase at the state level, we are shifting the costs and the tax burdens to the local level --- again, particularly devastating for rural communities which have a less developed economy.

The shifting of costs and burdens has also occurred in the area of higher education. Again, these types of cuts hit our rural residents hardest because our rural families have lower median household incomes and less disposable income for college or technical training.

SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORTATION FUNDING

We also see the effects of the state budget cuts in rural communities in the area of transportation for the most vulnerable citizens. STEP, Inc., is our local, non-profit, Shared-Ride provider, and has been in the business of getting people to their appointments for more than 35 years. STEP provided transportation 365 days

a year on 24/7 basis, in a 2,100 square mile bi-county area of Lycoming and Clinton counties. During the last 10 years, STEP has provided almost 1.4 million one-way trips and has logged 10 million miles meeting the transportation needs of seniors, the blind, and others physically and intellectual disabilities. This service helps these residents remain independent.

Many of these appointments are for life-sustaining needs like cancer treatment and dialysis, and many are for other critical medical needs like primary care, lab work, physical therapy, and mental health and intellectual disabilities services. Still others are for employment and social appointments for our seniors. All are essential for our rural residents to remain independent and vital members of our communities and to decrease the enormous costs associated with premature institutionalization and the over use of ambulance services and emergency room visits.

During this time, however, costs have escalated, while funding has decreased. Along with other transportation providers throughout the state, STEP has been using its own resources to keep the service functioning.

Although STEP has decreased its service level in an attempt to achieve long-term sustainability, the current decision of reduce funding for the Medical Assistance Transportation Program, plus the higher administrative costs associated with proposed co-pays, is jeopardizing the entire program.

The elimination of this type of program would be devastating to residents in our rural community.

STATE POLICE AVIATION UNIT AT THE WILLIAMSPORT AIRPORT

We have also seen how the budget cuts have affected the Pennsylvania State Police Aviation Patrol Unit IV, which serves all of Lycoming, Northumberland, Union, Snyder, Montour, Clinton, Tioga, Cameron, Potter, Bradford, and Sullivan counties.

This service has been operational at the Williamsport Regional Airport for over 40 years. It has been the primary air support unit for Pennsylvania State Troopers and local law enforcement agencies in a 7,630 square mile rural area with a population of almost 500 ,000.

The Unit has played major roles in rescue and support operations in response to many natural and man-made disasters, including of the flooding of September 2011 which destroyed much of our community.

The mountainous terrain of the service area of Unit IV makes aerial support a necessity in order to ensure efficient and effective response to all emergencies. Moreover, the rapid and exponential increase in motor vehicle traffic throughout Lycoming, Clinton, Tioga, Potter, and Bradford counties due to the Marcellus Shale natural gas well drilling operations, and the possibility of emergency issues related to those operations, further necessitate the need for a nearby emergency aerial response unit.

I urge you to consider providing the funds necessary to return of the State Police to return their Aviation Patrol Unit to the Williamsport Regional Airport.

In summary, I urge the Committee to consider the special needs of our rural communities as we debate this budget. And to recognize that some parts of our state need help, not because they are not willing to help themselves, but because they are fundamentally poorer in their economic make up.

We are not looking for a handout. We are looking for a helping hand.