



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Malcolm Smith

Democratic Conference Calls For Senate To Take Up Bill Providing 9/11 First Responder Benefits And Compensation

MALCOLM A. SMITH July 15, 2007

State Senate Democratic Leader Malcolm A. Smith today urged Senate Majority Leader Joe Bruno to put S.3070 -- a bill to provide 9/11 first responders with enhanced workers compensation benefits -- on today's Special Session agenda.

Smith was joined today by Democratic Senators Diane Savino and William Stachowski who also called on Republican colleagues to join them in passing the first-responder bill and other critical pieces of legislation.

Earlier this month, Governor Spitzer vetoed S.3070, a bill that would have increased compensation to Emergency Medical Technicians and paramedics employed by private hospitals who worked at Ground Zero in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

"Many of these workers, like their brothers and sisters who also placed their lives and health on the line, are suffering today," said Smith (D-Queens). "This bill passed both houses of the Legislature unanimously because we feel no effort to aid those who helped New York City recover from the 9/11 attacks is too great."

In addition to S.3070, Senators said priority should also be given to Wicks Law reform, Paid Family Leave and the Reproductive Health and Privacy Protection Act. Wicks Law reform and Paid Family Leave have already gained Assembly approval earlier during the Legislature's regular session, which ended in June.

Smith said today's special session offers a chance for lawmakers to close the loop on unfinished business left behind in June when the Senate and Assembly broke for summer recess. At that time, Smith had called for an extension of session beyond its scheduled close so that the Senate could address a number of key legislative priorities, though Majority Leader Bruno kept to the scheduled Senate Session end date.

Despite reports that the Assembly is not expected to convene, Smith said progress can still be made during today's Special Session.

"There are a number of bills the Assembly passed earlier this year that have not yet won Senate approval," Smith said. "These include Paid Family Leave and Wicks Law -- critical pieces of legislation that will help alleviate some of the financial squeeze felt by hardworking New York families -- as well as a bill to secure women's reproductive planning rights."

"By passing these measures, we can overcome Albany's notorious practice of advancing one-house bills that hold so much promise but are ultimately held up due to one chamber's refusal to act," Smith added.

Under a Paid Family Leave bill that already passed the Assembly, workers can elect to contribute 45 cents from their paycheck per week toward a benefit allowing them up to 12 weeks paid leave from work for the purpose of attending to health-related matters like an ailing relative or a newborn child.

The Federal Family Medical Leave Act -- passed in the 1990s -- allows workers to take unpaid leave; however, Savino said, the benefit is declined by many workers who are ineligible for paid sick leave or paid vacation time from their employer. A state-level Paid Family Leave Act would help bridge the gap for these families.

"Parents should not have to accept a loss of income in order to take care of a newborn son or daughter at a critical time in the child's life," she added.

Wicks Law reform is another important measure intended to curb public spending and alleviate the pinch of high taxes on New York families, Senate Democrats said. Dating back to 1912, Wicks Law now requires that public construction projects costing \$50,000 or more be divided into four separate contracts.

Stachowski (D-Buffalo) noted that separate bids lead to higher construction costs and increased public spending. In June, Governor Spitzer announced that elected leaders had agreed to raise the cost threshold under which the split contracting provisions apply. A bill that already passed the Assembly would require separate bids once a public project reaches a minimum cost of \$3 million in New York City, \$1.5 million in the City's suburbs and \$500,000 Upstate.

"When constituents are asked what issue affects them the most, again and again the answer is high property taxes," said Stachowski, Ranking Democrat on the Senate's Finance Committee. "When legislators are asked what is being done about New York's punishing tax burden, one answer is Wicks Law reform -- provided that the Senate passes this important bill."

Earlier this session, the Senate Democratic Conference held a press conference calling for

passage of the Reproductive Health and Privacy Protection Act, which would strengthen a woman's right to safe and legal reproductive planning options under state law. It would also reaffirm -- at the state level -- the basic principle of reproductive privacy rights established more than thirty years ago by the U.S. Supreme Court. Today the Conference reasserted its call to pass the measure during today's Special Session.

In addition, Democrats said now is time for the Senate to pass a mandatory overtime law for nurses, which also passed the Assembly. The Nurses Overtime Bill would prohibit health care employers from requiring nurses to work overtime beyond their regularly scheduled shift. Emergency or disaster situations would be exempted and nurses would not be prohibited from voluntarily working overtime.
