Representative

Patty Butler

32nd District

1997 Session Report

July 1997

Dear Friends and Neighbors,

This was my very first session as your representative and, as such, a memorable experience. I was assigned to three committees: Higher Education, Natural Resources, and Finance, where I served as the assistant ranking Democrat. I was also given two extra assignments. I was appointed to the Arts and Tourism Committee of the National Conference of State Legislators, where I will work with legislators from around the country, sharing ideas on those issues. And, I was named to the Governor's Council on Child Abuse and Neglect, to study and recommend policies related to these unfortunate children.

Our timely adjournment on April 27, without the usual "special session" for unfinished business, was due in large part to the skillful work of Governor Locke, who negotiated with legislative leaders over a series of key disagreements. Among these were the biennial budget and its impact on education, juvenile justice improvement and tax rollbacks.

As a new legislator, learning how to work within the system and get things done was very important. I would like to thank Rep. Grace Cole for her continued leadership and guidance as I made my way through the early weeks of my term. I would also like to thank my predecessor, former Rep. Nancy Rust, for her support and advice before I took office, and for laying the groundwork for many of the important environmental policies we fought to protect this year.

If you have questions or comments, please call or write me at our district office. The phone number and address are listed on this page. Your opinions are important to me.

It is a genuine honor to serve the people of the 32nd District and the State of Washington. Thank you so much for this opportunity.

Sincerely,

Patty Butler

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State Representative
Assistant Minority Whip

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Committees:
- Natural Resources *(assistant ranking minority member)*
- Higher Education
- Finance

Education is the great equalizer

I believe that for higher education to truly be the great equalizer, it must be accessible and affordable to any Washingtonian with the determination to succeed. Higher education is indisputably valuable both to the state and the individual. A well-educated workforce is the foundation of a high-wage, high-skill economy, where each dollar invested in higher education returns $9 to $10 to the economy.

Access is the first step:

We are faced with a shortage of 84,000 slots for Washington residents who will be seeking a college degree through the year 2010. To address this pressing demand, the Legislature funded an additional 6,390 enrollments, including 2,190 at four-year colleges and 4,200 at community and technical colleges.

Financial aid:

Financial aid is the key that unlocks the college door for many working families. We approved financial aid increases to help nearly 7,300 more working families in each of the next two years. Nearly 6,000 more needy students will get state grants to help pay for college; 735 additional students will get work-study jobs; and, 550 more students who have completed their first two years of college will receive $2,500 grants to earn their four-year degrees.

Advance College Tuition Program:

This exciting new program offers hope to working families, many of whom earn too much to qualify for college financial aid. It lets parents of future college students pay today's prices for tomorrow's tuition. This program will begin next year, and more information will be provided when it is ready to be implemented.

Low, predictable tuition costs:

Two principles were repeated time and again during this year's tuition debate: "Low tuition is the best form of financial aid." and "Predictable, affordable and stable tuition helps families plan and save." I worked to set up a stable and affordable tuition policy for our colleges and universities, but not enough legislators were willing to support the plan. Tuition will increase by 4 percent for most students in each of the next two years — an amount most agreed was affordable. The issue of long-term stability and predictability must be addressed. I will continue to work on this issue during the interim.

Dislocated workers:

I opposed efforts to reduce the Workforce Training Act, the highly successful worker retraining program that has given new family-wage jobs to 20,000 workers. The final legislative budget funds the program at $61.7 million -- $10 million below the current level that provides retraining to 7,200 workers each year. The cuts will force community colleges to deny retraining to 1,000 dislocated workers, in order to provide the financial aid and other support services the other 6,200 retraining students need to complete school and find family-wage jobs.

Protecting our natural resources and environment

Offshore oil drilling

A bright spot this year came with enactment of a permanent ban on oil drilling off Washington's coast, ending work begun several years ago by former Rep. Nancy Rust. This represented a major victory, not just for those who fought for this ban, but for those who value Washington's coastline.

Protecting Washington's shorelines

The most glaring environmental attack of the session came with House passage of **HB 2198,** which I strongly opposed, to remove state protection of shorelines, undermining the voter-approved Shorelines Management Act. HB 2198 sought to shift enforcement of shoreline protection from state agencies to cities and counties, who are less likely to withstand intense pressure from developers. Such opposition likely played a major role in the Senate killing this measure.

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Finance Committee

The Finance Committee deals with raising money for the state's budget and providing tax breaks to taxpayers. This session, I voted for a total of $148,798,000 in tax breaks, most of which will benefit homeowners and small businesses.

Property tax relief:

The debate over property tax relief was one of how much and to whom. I supported a Democratic plan that would have granted a $205 per year tax credit to homeowners. The bill that passed grants only about $18 per year to the average homeowner, subject to a vote of the people on the November ballot.

B&O tax rollback:

I supported a bill that would have provided a tax credit for small businesses equal to the lesser of $2,520 per year or 40 percent of the taxes due for small service businesses. This bill did not pass, but I voted for the compromise B&O tax rollback bill negotiated by Governor Locke.

Budget compromise protects funding for kids, schools

For the first time since 1982, Republicans held the majority in both the sate House and Senate, steering the course of all policy and budget decisions. The budget they presented to the governor was disappointing because of all the cuts to public schools and several cost-effective programs that help children and families.

Negotiations between the governor and Legislature resulted in a compromise budget totaling $19.07 billion for the next two years. It falls about $110 million below the spending limit established by Initiative 601.

Here are a few highlights:

Education:

The final budget protects funding for education reform, school safety, technology in the classroom, and programs for kids who can't yet speak English — all of which were in jeopardy. School employees, who've

School levy reform

I supported two changes to the state's school levy laws that I believe are fair and necessary. School districts will now have the option of seeking a levy for up to four years, as opposed to the current two-year limit. This helps districts do better long-range planning and avoids constantly going to the voters for money.

I also supported allowing voters to tax themselves an extra four percent to support local schools if they so choose. The law that allows this was due to expire, and I voted to extend it. Local taxpayers who are willing to pay more for better schools should be able to do so.

Rep. Butler (left) at the bill signing ceremony for SB 5483, which establishes licensing, training, insurance and equipment requirements for whitewater river outfitters.

had only one cost-of-living increase in the last four years, received a one-time 3 percent raise. I would have liked to see them receive at least 5 percent over the two-year budget period, or 2.5 percent per year.

Basic Health Plan (BHP):

The budget provides 11,500 new openings for subsidized, low-cost health insurance managed by the state. Unfortunately, over 70,000 people remain on the waiting list. I'll continue to make funding for BHP one of my top legislative priorities.

Welfare reform:

Job training, child care, and health care are funded at minimal levels. Legal immigrants are eligible for benefits. Strict work requirements and a five-year lifetime limit are established. Drivers and professional licenses may be suspended for nonpayment of child support.

Child protection:

The caseload for Child Protective Services (CPS) workers is reduced from 32 to 29 cases per worker. A new "Passport Program" is funded which well protect foster children by providing a concise record of their current medical, dental, psychological and education status.

Juvenile Justice Reform

After years of trying to revamp our state's outmoded system of dealing with young criminals, the Legislature this year passed a landmark, bipartisan juvenile justice bill. In the final days of session, Democrats, Republicans, and the governor put together a sweeping reform package which passed both houses unanimously. Strong emphasis is placed on public safety and getting to troubled kids **before** it's too late. HB 3900 includes:

- Automatically sending the most violent 16- and 17-year-olds to adult court. Judges would have the option of adult court in other cases.
- Simplifying the juvenile sentencing grid. Allows judges greater discretion in sentencing, including detention for teens who don't yet have long criminal histories, community service, restitution, and mandatory drug and alcohol treatment. Juvenile court judges estimate that fully 75% of teen offenders have drug or alcohol abuse problems.
- Involving parents in the court process.
- Mandating tough new sentences for the most serious and violent offenders to make the juvenile system a real deterrent to crime.

Equally important, after years of talking big but never providing the money, we placed funds in the 1997 budget to implement these critically needed, sweeping changes.

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