

Mensch makes district constituents priority

With nearly seven months in office, senator talks about his role as public servant.

By **RANDY KRAFT**
SPECIAL WRITER

State Sen. Bob Mensch's hope for the people of Pennsylvania is that the Legislature will realize it is not inevitable that government must grow every year, which costs residents more in taxes, surcharges and other hidden fees.

"My number one priority has become full financial accountability on behalf of the Legislature to the people of Pennsylvania," said Mensch. "The assumption every year is 'last year we spent X. This year it's going to be X plus a factor.' It's always got to more. Why? Show me where it says it has to be. Show me why we have to increase taxes and surcharges and other hidden costs to our people."

"Why do we have to have more mandates – and drive them down to counties and to school boards and to municipalities – that ultimately cost our taxpayers more money? They're paying more to the school district and more to the municipality. Why do we think we have to do that?"

"I call it bureaucratic inertia that just has us growing unnecessarily. It's happened at every level of government in our state."

"We can only spend what we have. We have to begin to live within our means. Businesses do it. Families have to do it. The government should be asked to do that. Who's asking? It's the people. That's what I heard when I was campaigning. They were asking us to do that."

Mensch became a state senator on Oct. 19, after winning a special election in September. His 24th Senatorial district includes parts of Bucks, Lehigh, Montgomery and Northampton counties. He ran for the Senate while in his second term as a state representative serving the 147th legislative district in Montgomery County.

In a recent interview in his Quakertown district office, where jazz quietly played, the 64-year-old Republican senator was thoughtful, persuasive and passionate. He repeatedly demonstrated the pragmatism of a business executive turned politician.

"While I campaigned, I want to emphasize I did not hear one person say 'increase my taxes'," said Mensch. "I didn't hear one person say 'undo my health care'. I didn't hear one person say 'expand government'. Yet if you listen to a lot of the debates in Harrisburg, everything is about growing more government."

"There's a proposal now to tax all non-profits. It's not going to get anywhere but someone thinks we need more revenue. So rather than thinking about cutting, they now want to tax the non-profits."

In seven years under the administration of Democratic Gov. Ed Rendell, said Mensch, "our state government has grown by \$12 billion. That translates to a 40 percent increase in government spending. I ask people 'have you seen an increase in government services?' No one can cite an instance where they've seen an increase in services."

He said state-funded child care has increased, but that enlarged the budget by only a couple of million dollars.

"I don't think I'm supposed to grow government on the backs of the people, especially by \$12 billion, and not be able to see the results of it."

"I've voted against every budget so far because the signs were there from the start that we were heading south."

"We've grown the Department of Public Welfare to the size of a Fortune 100 company. It's now the largest department in our state. We spend more on that than we do on education. I don't think that's what our people want us to do."

"If education is truly the number one priority, I think we'd shift those priorities. Be-



State Sen. Bob Mensch works in his office at 312 W. Broad St., Quakertown, with staffers, left to right, Danielle Bodnar, Lauren Schenk and Lisa Walter. (Photo by Randy Kraft.)

tween education and welfare, 83 percent of the general fund is consumed. They are only two of 14 [state] departments."

He said the Legislature needs to prioritize the state's spending needs.

PERSONAL INSIGHT

Despite his disdain for spending by the Rendell administration and an autumn Senate race where the opposition's "mean-spirited" campaign was "negative and full of lies," Mensch speaks magnanimously about Democrats and does not think political labels should impede cooperation and progress.

Asked to share something about himself that his new constituents may not know, Mensch said: "I always believe the glass is half full, I'm an eternal optimist. I'm not afraid to address difficult issues but I try to do it with a smile. There's always something to laugh at in life despite all the problems that you think you see."

He said he won 58 percent of the vote the first time he was elected to the House in November 2006, 61 percent when he was re-elected in November 2008 and 67 percent in the recent Senate race.

"Obviously the people think I am thinking right."

He "absolutely" plans to run again and hopes to serve "several" terms in the Senate.

"I have some things to say for the people and things I want to do for them," he said.

He has to be re-elected to a full four-year Senate term in November. He already has campaign events scheduled.

Mensch said only having to run every four years was part of the reason he ran for

the state Senate. But he added a much bigger reason was that Republicans are in a majority in the Senate "by a comfortable margin. If you want to get something done in Pennsylvania... you have to be in the majority party."

He said the Senate is much more collegial "on both sides of the aisle" than the House, adding it also is more deliberate.

"We have legislation introduced every day in the House just for the sake of pandering," said Mensch. "Part of it is because they are running every two years. In the Senate, because you're not running every two years, you have a chance to be more thoughtful and more deliberate."

A MORE THAN FULL-TIME JOB

Mensch said being a state senator is "very much" a full time job, "despite what a lot of people try to suggest."

He said it more time consuming than being a state representative, because his Senatorial district is four times as large. "Typically a House district has between 62,000 and 65,000 constituents," he said, adding his Senate district has 250,000 constituents.

He does have a larger staff to meet the needs of those constituents.

"And people who use the services very much appreciate having the staff here and making government services available to them. It's not always someone on the dole or looking for a handout. The people we serve have very genuine interests and concerns."

When not driving back and forth to Harrisburg, he travels throughout the sprawling district, which stretches from north of Easton down to Lansdale, and his four of-

fices in it.

"If you want to know what the people are thinking you need to talk to the people," he said. "The job is to represent them. I have my own opinions, but I can't represent my opinions as being reflective of a quarter million people. I need to talk to them. And I often change my opinion to the majority consent of view."

Mensch said he traveled a great deal when he worked for AT&T for 28 years and then several years for Arbros Communications, before retiring and then beginning his new career as a legislator. But even with all that travel he was at home more than he is now. "At least when I got home on a Friday night, I had the weekend."

He said being a state senator often consumes seven days a week and involves much more work on weekends than just doing ribbon cuttings at openings and other ceremonial duties. But he added that even "the people whose ribbon you're cutting really do expect you to be there."

"There's more time pressure. Today we have eight meetings and events. It started at 8 o'clock this morning and the last one starts at 8 o'clock. It's a fairly typical day."

He said as a state representative he spent about 180 nights a year in Harrisburg. "The Senate tends to be more efficient with its use of time. I am told I will be out there less. And in my two plus years in the House, my observation was we had more session days than the Senate and they got the same amount of work done."

However, he serves on five Senate committees, compared to three when he was in the House. "That could pull me into more days in Harrisburg."

State senator makes service to constituents priority for his office

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ELIMINATING OFFICES?

In addition to his office in Harrisburg, Mensch has district offices in Quakertown, Emmaus, Lansdale and near Easton.

The Quakertown office is the main district office and the one closest to his Montgomery County home “right now.”

“I would like to seriously consider consolidating offices,” said Mensch. “There is one office in each county right now. And everyone thinks that’s the way it should be. But I’m looking at it as a business person, not just as a politician, and thinking ‘could I consolidate and still provide the same level of service?’ The politician says keep all four. This is an internal wrestle I’m having mentally. Which one of me do I listen to?”

“It’s an ongoing discussion. I don’t know that I’ve reached any conclusions. I doubt that anything will happen for a year.”

While he is taking the initiative to reduce expenses, saying “it’s a responsibility I have,” he added: “The pressure is beginning to come from Harrisburg as well – and it should. If the budget keeps going the way it is, it will be inevitable. There are cost pressures for both people and office space right now. We’re in our 22nd consecutive month as a state with negative revenue.”

Mensch also has two fewer staffers than did his predecessor, Rob Wonderling, “and I probably won’t replace them.” But he does not intend to further reduce the size of his staff because he anticipates the caseload will remain the same even if there are fewer offices.

His staffers are busy answering phone calls and e-mails. He said more people communicate that way than by walking into an office, which is another reason all the offices may not be needed. He said the phone and e-mail communication is “huge.” Constituent contacts are up considerably, both because of the economy and because of the ease of electronic communication. His staff “absolutely” answers every e-mail.

He personally responds to many of them and will do so until his staff knows him well enough to know how he thinks and is able to respond for him. “I review a lot of their responses that they are sending on my behalf.”

DEMOCRATS FOR PARENTS

Mensch is a native of Pennsburg who has lived in Montgomery County’s Marlborough Township since 1975. “I come from a Democrat and Republican family,” he said. “My parents were both Democrats. God bless them. Those values I learned from Mom and

Dad still influence the things I do publicly as a politician. My votes, my opinions, my legislation are reflections of the family values I learned and grew up with in western Montgomery County.”

He said his mother, who just turned 90 on Dec. 7, is his strongest campaigner.

He recommended that Democrats who don’t know him should talk to Democrats who have worked with him. “You’ll find that I’m party blind. We share many values and, in general, I don’t think the differences the media wants us to see between Democrats and Republicans are really that important.” He said very often the differences between a conservative Democrat and a Republican or between a liberal Republican and a mainstream Democrat “are shades of gray.”

Mensch said the question — are you a Democrat or a Republican? — “seems to be the only thing we really think somehow separates us from each other. And it’s not true.” He said ethnicity and religion no longer separate people, so nor should the labels Republican and Democrat.

MUSIC AND HOBBIES

Mensch served two years as a Marlborough Township supervisor. He and his wife JoAnn have two children and one grandchild.

He grew up in western Montgomery County but says he is familiar with much more of the district. His family shopped in Quakertown and Allentown. On summer days he often rode all over this part of the state, helping his grandfather Genszler deliver ice cream in a Woodson Dairy truck. He also remembers swimming and playing music at Pine Tree Park (now Community Park) in Emmaus.

Mensch plays the clarinet and sax. At one point, years ago, he thought about making a living as a musician. He attended Valley Forge Military College on a music scholarship, but graduated with a bachelor of science degree in business.

Years ago, he played with community bands in Red Hill, Quakertown, Allentown, Emmaus and Pottstown.

He seldom gets time to play with it anymore, but is a founding member of the Geryville Hobo Band. “We’re famous in Emmaus, they still have a police car follow us,” he said.

His home band is Red Hill Band, which was started by his great-grandparents. He’s still involved with that band, saying: “I’ll steal the time to do that. It’s a great group of friends and it’s cathartic. There’s a real sanity with it.”

He said he’ll also “sit at home and pick a horn up late at night, 1 o’clock, 2 o’clock. Sometimes it’s so soft almost nobody can hear it. Only the dogs might complain.” He has two dogs, a chocolate lab and a cocker spaniel.

He said jazz is his favorite kind of music.

He also enjoys “O”-gauge model trains, flower gardening and woodworking. “Both the woodworking and the gardening are suffering dramatically,” he said. “This year I would have won the garden prize for weeds. I don’t get the time.”

HIS VIEWS

Here are Mensch’s views on some issues:

Prescription drug abuse: “I’m pursuing legislation to go after the bad guys who are selling prescription drugs,” he said. “We have guys who are stealing the drugs and stealing prescription pads and selling them on the black market. They are making this an industry. It’s growing faster than experimentation with marijuana by first-time users and it’s much more lethal. You don’t hear of many people dying from their first experimentation with marijuana. Kids are dying from their first experiment of a cocktail from prescription drugs.”

Electric rates increasing: He said the imminent expiration of government caps on electric rates, which will cause those rates to rise significantly, is “a problem coming to fruition that the legislature created 15 years ago by putting the caps on. Now everyone wants to blame the electric companies. The legislation to help our residents with this has been stymied by the majority leadership in the House for too long. It should have been passed six months ago.”

He said that bill would limit the impact of the increase by spreading it over three years, adding it is not too late to pass it. “Two people have been sitting on it in the House.”

Mensch realizes many people believe the electric companies are just getting rich, but said they need capital to increase their ability to generate more power in Pennsylvania. “There is no new generating application in this state. If you want to pursue something like nuclear, which I still think is a viable option, it takes 20 years from the time you file the application until it’s on line.”

Without increased rates, he said, “electric companies aren’t going to be able to fix generating plants. Pretty soon we’re going to be California with brown-outs. We’re stressing our infrastructure now because of it.”

State police protection: Mensch said the

legislative proposal that would charge townships and boroughs for state police coverage has gotten a lot of attention, but “that won’t fly. That won’t get anywhere.” He said the sponsor of that House bill lives in the city of Lancaster, a city that does not need state police because it has its own police department. “He doesn’t care what the tax consequences are to all the townships.”

He said issue was discussed when he was on the local government committee in the House.

“The only way we would ever have voted for that bill is if every dollar collected went right back to local property tax relief. That was not a popular notion because they want the money in the general fund so they can spend more.”

Casinos: Mensch said the promise of legalized gambling in Pennsylvania was that there would be immediate property tax relief. That was predicated on revenue from 14 operating casinos. He said the economy negatively impacted projections for business at those casinos.

“People aren’t coming out to the casinos. Secondly, there are only eight operational out of 14, four more have approved licenses and two more are still up in the air.” He said the promise of property tax relief remains unfulfilled “for six years now.”

Pension fund crisis: The statewide pension shortfall that threatens to increase school districts’ taxes dramatically in the coming years is a lingering problem “that needs attention now,” said Mensch. “We’re doing a disservice by not addressing it. We have to start thinking about how we’re going to fix it. We need a task force. We need to bring in some industry people...people with outside experience in these things. And I don’t want to see it awarded to one more of Rendell’s favorite law firms, because they haven’t served us very well.”

The environment: Preserving farmland and open space are among Mensch’s priorities. He helped create the Unami Watershed Conservancy. He said he finds common ground with most other Republicans on issues such as open space and protecting watersheds.

“There is a perception I would argue with that says Republicans aren’t environmentally conscious. Environmental stewardship does not fall along party lines. That’s bull. There are environmental stewards on both sides and there are people who are just willing to waste the environment on both sides.”

On the web:
www.senatormensch.com

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