

{ face TO FACE



Scarnati

Leads Senate with Principle and Tact

Joe Scarnati is President Pro Tempore of the Pennsylvania Senate, the third highest constitutional office in the Commonwealth. He has a lot on his plate. But, when queried about avocations, he pondered for a moment, then answered, "I suppose that I like to work outside, around the house. Whether it's landscaping or working on the house, I don't care. I've always been like that. I see the connection between hard work and something to show for it."

Perhaps this is one of the reasons the 46 year old Jefferson County Republican was elected to his leadership post by colleagues in 2007 after only one term in the upper chamber. His business background brings a solid work ethic and "can do" spirit to the Senate.

Scarnati was born and raised in Brockway and graduated from Penn State Dubois. He returned home to help manage for the next 20 years the family restaurant, where his first job had been washing dishes in the kitchen at the age of eight. The business was established by his grandfather in the 1930s.

When Brockway Glass, the town's major employer, was merged with another company and closed its operations, Scarnati saw an opportunity to recycle the vacant facility. He transformed the property into a personal care home, and then managed it for the next seven years.



Meanwhile, service on the Brockway Borough Council and the Jefferson County Development Council allowed Scarnati to bring his business acumen to bear on local civic issues. He was instrumental in the creation of a much needed industrial park, which has taken some of the sting out of losing the glass manufacturing plant in Brockway.

717- What motivated you to enter state level politics?

JS- It was a step by step process. I was on the Brockway Borough Council for eight years, and very interested in the economic vitality of the community. The glass plant closing, the industrial park...these were some of the issues in which I got involved. In the 2000 election, the incumbent Republican senator from our 25th District declined to remove his name from the ballot after a criminal conviction. I thought that it was disgraceful to see a candidate for public office wearing an ankle bracelet. So, I decided to run for the seat as an independent and won by 197 votes.

I was further motivated by the chronic job losses in this state. It's a hemorrhaging, a bloodletting. I was not at all happy with the way things were going, and are still going. As a businessman, I have a little different view from some others as to how the problem should be approached.

717- What is your major objective as the Senate Republican leader?

JS- To reduce the tax burden on all Pennsylvanians, especially the small business owners, and make this an attractive state in which to invest. Let me emphasize that such policies need to be predictable and consistent for that to occur. For example, the Capital Stock and Franchise Tax is being phased out, scheduled for extinction by 2011, in spite of the Governor's efforts to suspend the phase out or reduce its effectiveness. This is a great savings to small business owners. It gives them money to invest in their enterprise, to buy equipment, expand, and hire new employees.

717- Might some business owners simply keep that money for themselves?

JS- When you're a small business owner, your company is your equity. When your working days are over and you sell the business, that is your retirement income. So, you have a personal stake in growing it. In the process, you're purchasing more capital goods and supplies, advertising, and employing more people. This helps the entire community."

717- Let us discuss some specific issues. How about illegal immigration in Pennsylvania?

JS- We estimate that there are about 100,000 to 150,000 illegals in Pennsylvania, costing the state approximately \$300 million per year in public benefits. People are sick of it. And the federal government has done virtually nothing in this regard. As part of the response to the problem, the Senate leadership crafted SB 9. This bill would deny benefits to anyone who cannot verify his legal status or American citizenship. I don't think that the burden to determine employees' legal resident status should be placed on business owners.

717- You are pleased with last year's budget.

JS- Yes. After the Governor proposed seven new taxes amounting to about \$2 billion, and an expansion of current programs, the Senate Republicans fought back. We established

"I see the connection between hard work and something to show for it."

a conservative beachhead, if you will, to cut the proposed spending in half. We have achieved more success in this effort than any of the states surrounding Pennsylvania. To sustain economic growth in the state, we're determined to keep spending under control, and not lose our basic philosophy in the day to day politics of this place.

717- Talk about the public school funding debate.

JS- In the 2007 primary, the voters in each school district had the opportunity to decide if they wanted to use the earned income tax as the primary means to fund local education, instead of the property tax. The proposal was resoundingly defeated. That tells me that people don't want a shift in taxes. They want a reduction. They want districts to get spending under control. And that needs to be a collaborative effort among all involved... board, administration, teachers, district residents. We need to emphasize keeping costs down, rather than raising revenue. That's the first step. Thereafter, other means to further support public education can be discussed.

717- How about government reform, and the idea of a Constitutional Convention?

JS- Right now, I think the main goal is to restore trust and respect. We have started down that road by opening records,

and eliminating the midnight and lame duck sessions. Give us some time, a few years, and then judge the results. If things aren't improving, then we can discuss a constitutional convention.

717- What is your position on the proposed marriage amendment to the state constitution?

JS- Obviously, this can be a very divisive issue. But I believe that a marriage is between a man and a woman, and I support the efforts to protect that status. We need an amendment to the constitution to protect the definition of marriage from activist courts.

717- You were recently threatened with a lawsuit for opening the Senate sessions with prayer. Discuss that.

JS- A Washington-based organization, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, has taken exception to the practice of opening each Senate session with prayer. I replied to them that if they continue to pursue it, we would see them in court. They contend that the prayers offered are not non-sectarian. But, we've had all kinds of clergy begin our sessions. We don't favor any one religion or denomination. Recently a Jewish rabbi offered the invocation in Hebrew. I didn't understand him, but said "Amen" when he concluded. You know, we need all the help we can get.

717- There is an effort under way to outlaw teacher strikes in Pennsylvania. Your comments?

JS- When there is a strike in a particular district, the teachers, the board, and the parents are not really the losers. It's the kids, of course. Being sensitive to that reality, I very much object to teacher strikes. Having said that, I believe that it is a matter that should be settled within the local districts rather than imposing a statewide solution.

"Right now, I think the main goal is to restore trust and respect."

The local citizens need to get involved. And, I think we've seen a reduction in teacher strikes in recent years.

717- What would we be pleased or surprised to know about Joe Scarnati?

JS- I think that I'm just a regular guy. I love being at home, with my children, family, and friends. Coming to Harrisburg to represent my constituents is an honor and a privilege. But to me, it's a temporary service, not a career. 