

# Good news, bad news on land grab bill

**BY CURT HARLER**  
**HARRISBURG** — There was good news and bad news for the Knapp family and other Pennsylvania farmers as Governor Richard Thornburgh waded through a pile of late-session bills approved by Harrisburg lawmakers.

Among the measures were SB 985 and SB 986, the package which would require return of condemned farmland to farmers at its original condemnation price if it were not to be used for the purpose condemned.

The good news is the

Governor signed SB 986.

The bad news is SB 985 was vetoed at the same time.

But wait — there's still more good news. The Governor vetoed 985 not because he objected to giving farmers the required protection from municipal bodies condemning their land and then reaping huge speculative gains, but because of a rider attached to 985.

SB 985 dealt with the school code. SB 986 was an eminent domain bill. Eminent domain is all-encompassing and should override even provisions of other measures.

The rider to SB 985, dealing with the Public School Code, had no effect of farms. Rather, it concerned community colleges.

The Governor's staff of legal experts reviewed the two bills and said they felt the Knapps could be assured of the return of their farm with the passage of SB 986 alone.

The Knapp farm had been condemned by the North Penn School District over a decade ago. But the property never was used to put up a school or school-related building.

Then, a year ago, the District decided to sell the property for development as a shopping center. The parcel of land is adjacent to the Montgomeryville Mall.

In the process of buying the land 11 years ago at condemnation prices, holding it, and selling it for

commercial development, the school district stood to reap huge profits.

The State Grange, in championing the fight for the Knapps, noted that the move set a dangerous precedent for farms and public bodies in other areas as well.

How soon the Knapps land is returned to them, and when the transfer will be completed, depend at the moment on the North Penn School District.

But observers at the Grange say they expect the transfer to be completed soon, probably before the year's end.

In the meantime, another bill with strong rural backing also was vetoed by the Governor.

HB 1111, sponsored by Senate Ag Committee Chairman Patrick Stapleton, would have allowed large school districts to break down into smaller districts.

The case in point was the huge, single district in Armstrong County. The district covers a large geographic area and transportation to centralized schools was difficult both because of time and the fuel shortage.

But the Department of Education, fearing such a measure would lead to wholesale breakup of consolidated districts around the state, asked the Governor to veto the bill.

Also signed by the Governor was HB 1673, the unemployment compensation reform bill.

The bill is an attempt to

balance the debt-ridden state unemployment compensation fund. Representative Noah Wenger said the fund is paying out \$1 million more a day in benefits than is paid into it.

In signing HB 1673, the Governor said the measure is "fundamental to the restoration of the Commonwealth's overall economic health."

"It is a major triumph over almost a decade of neglect that left Pennsylvania's unemployment compensation fund insolvent and \$1.4 billion in debt to the federal government."

But the charge to so-called 'negative balance employers' provided for in HB 1673 probably will hurt those hiring migrant help.

The provision says those who have a higher rate of payout from unemployment compensation funds will

have to pay more in to the fund.

Pennsylvania Farmers' Association said the new law is a first step in the right direction.

PFA said something had to be done to get the state's unemployment compensation package from going deeper into debt and it sees HB 1673 as the start for more improvement. But it is doubtful there will be any legislation introduced in the near future to expand on the bill's provisions.

As Governor Thornburgh pointed out when he signed the measure, it enables the state to go to Washington, D.C. and seek relaxation of the state debt repayment schedule.

He said he was confident the state and its federal congressmen would succeed in cleaning up the unemployment compensation mess in the Commonwealth.

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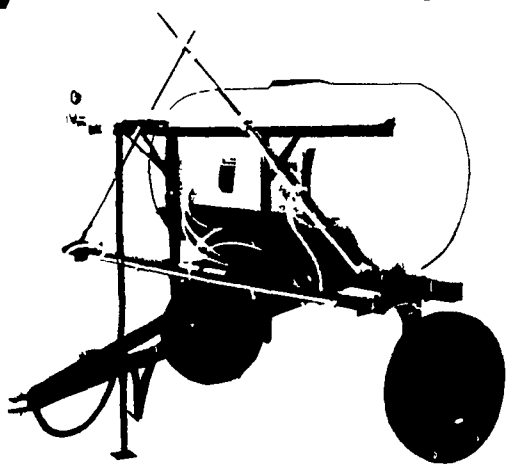
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