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Senator Kristin Phillips-Hill (R-York) was reappointed to serve as the Chair of the Senate Communications and Technology Committee by Senate President Pro Tempore Jake Corman (R-Centre/ Huntingdon /Juniata/ Mifflin) on Wednesday. Phillips-Hill served as the majority chair of the committee during the 2019-2020 session and says her reappointment offers an opportunity to continue working on major efforts to expand the availability of high-speed broadband to close the state's digital divide.

The committee's work has created the Unserved High-Speed Broadband Funding Program, improving access to high-speed broadband internet in the rural areas of Pennsylvania. "Our four public hearings on improving access to high-speed internet access allowed the committee to better understand the pressing needs of underserved communities and how state policy could provide a solution," Phillips-Hill said. "Those hearings led to action, and those initiatives will lead to high-speed internet in more homes and businesses in Pennsylvania."

Other issues including ransomware, cyber security and strengthening the state's IT systems will be looked at by the committee. "The committee cannot sit back and wait for a crisis to hit Pennsylvania. We need to remain vigilant and proactive to work in a bipartisan way to protect the digital assets of the Commonwealth and the personal information of Pennsylvanians." Phillip-Hill said. "We have seen that inaction can lead to major costs incurred by taxpayers. It is our goal to ensure that never happens here in Pennsylvania." – WHTM-TV, Harrisburg

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[Spotlight PA Pa. GOP lawmakers want voters to give them the power to end governor's emergency orders](#)

[Harrisburg Patriot-News Trump's 2nd impeachment: Pa.'s Republicans vote against it, while Dems say it was needed 'to heal'](#)

Pennsylvania voters could have the opportunity to consider as many as five amendments to the state's constitution as early as this spring that touch on a variety of controversial topics ranging from how appellate judges are elected to limiting the governor's disaster declaration powers. Two state House of Representatives committees on Wednesday, in their first meeting of the 2021-22 legislative session, approved bills that propose additions to the document that provides the framework for state government.

Three bills calling for constitutional changes were approved in the last legislative session. So if approved by both the House and Senate in identical form in this session, they would go to the voters for ratification, possibly as early as the spring. Both chambers would have to approve them by mid-February to appear on the May 18 primary ballot.

Gov. Tom Wolf came out voicing strenuous opposition to some of the proposed constitutional changes, which he said would subvert democracy. State Rep. Russ Diamond, R-Lebanon County, has sponsored a proposed constitutional amendment to [change the way voters elect the state's appellate court judges and justices](#). It narrowly passed the House Judiciary Committee by a one-vote margin, with two Republicans siding with Democrats in opposing it.

The aim of this proposed amendment is to provide more geographic diversity on the Supreme, Superior and Commonwealth court benches, Diamond said. It would establish judicial districts to guarantee voters in various regions in the state would have a judge or justice from their region deciding cases that come before the appellate courts. Currently, those jurists are elected on a statewide basis, which tends to result in most of them coming from the Philadelphia or Pittsburgh areas. "Regular citizens, real people, working people want our courts to reflect the geographic diversity of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania," Diamond said.

Beyond that, he said the districts would be equally divided by population, which could increase the chance for more racial diversity on the appellate benches as well. In a statement, Wolf said it would give the Legislature, which would draw the maps creating judicial districts, "the power to gerrymander our justice system." The governor said the Republican majorities in the General Assembly dislike rulings that have come out of appellate court and want to respond by taking "the right to pick judges away from their constituents and insert partisan politics into the judicial system."

Reps. Natalie Mihalek of Allegheny County and Todd Stephens of Montgomery County, the Republicans who cast the dissenting votes, agreed this could make judicial elections more partisan. "It's evident that what we have is ... a highly partisan bench right now and I think that this bill would further play into that," Mihalek said. "I don't think it's going to alleviate the partisanship that we see in our appellate courts."

Another proposed constitutional amendment that drew strenuous opposition from the governor calls for limiting the length of a gubernatorial disaster declaration to 21 days, from the current 90 days, unless the Legislature agrees to extend it in whole or in part. Those declarations give the governor expanded powers that allow him to make decisions in dealing with a disaster emergency without requiring legislative approval.

A second, related, constitutional change would clarify that the General Assembly through a concurrent resolution could vote to terminate a disaster declaration without having to present it to the governor. Both stem from the Republicans' dissatisfaction with decisions Wolf made in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and [a Supreme Court ruling](#) that said the state General Assembly can't act unilaterally to end Wolf's emergency declaration.

Considering the state has been under his COVID-19 emergency declaration for 10 months, Grove said, "A declaration is meant to allow the governor to quickly

address emergencies. It is not a vehicle for a single person to set policy that impacts Pennsylvanians and the state's economy in perpetuity." The House State Government Committee approved the legislation that included both of those proposed constitutional amendments related to disaster declarations as well as a less controversial proposed amendment barring the denial of equal rights based on race or ethnicity on a 15-10 party-line vote.

Wolf said these changes to disaster declaration powers would "hinder our ability to respond quickly, comprehensively and effectively to a disaster emergency by requiring any declaration to be affirmed by concurrent resolution of the legislature every three weeks. This would force partisan politics into the commonwealth's disaster response efforts and could slow down or halt emergency response when aid is most needed."

Rep. Malcolm Kenyatta, D-Philadelphia, said it was dangerous. "In a moment of a disaster we have to have an executive that is fully empowered to respond to that disaster whether that executive is Republican or Democrat," Kenyatta said. "They need to have the flexibility to respond." State Government Committee Chairman Seth Grove, R-York County, said Pennsylvania is the only state that allows for a 90-day disaster declaration. He said most states limit their declarations to 30 days and have some kind of trigger allowing them to be extended.

Diamond, who serves on the state government committee and has been highly critical of Wolf's COVID-19 response, said 21 days is enough time for "an executive to act unilaterally and swiftly in response to an emergency." But Democrat Rep. Jared Solomon of Philadelphia said this could hamstring the state's executive "in a power play to make sure that the majority party [at that time] gets to decide whether or not we have the necessarily tools in place for a declaration of a disaster."

Wolf was even more direct in his statement about this proposal as well as one that changes how appellate court judges are elected. "Make no mistake, these actions are thinly veiled power grabs and an attack on the other branches of government and on democracy itself, and I will oppose these efforts through every means possible," the governor said.

While much of the judiciary committee's time was spent discussing those proposed amendments dealing with the election of judges, one other less contentious amendment advanced to the full House for consideration. [House Bill 14](#), which passed on a bipartisan 24-1 vote, would [grant child sexual abuse survivors who timed-out of the legal system a two-year window](#) to pursue justice.

This change was among those recommended by [a statewide grand jury](#) in 2018 that investigated the claims of child sexual abuse within Roman Catholic dioceses in Pennsylvania. Efforts to establish an opportunity for victims to bring civil claims for past abuses at the same time the Legislature was considering changes to the civil and criminal statutes of limitations on this crime failed due to concerns about its constitutionality.

Rep. Jim Gregory, R-Blair County, an abuse survivor, with the support of another survivor, Rep. Mark Rozzi, D-Berks County, took up the charge to change the constitution to allow for this opportunity for survivors to file civil lawsuits against their abusers. The dissenting vote on this proposed amendment came from Rep. Paul Schemel, R-Franklin County. He has opposed this because, "the statute of limitations exists for the very reason of preventing injustice because great expanses of time make it difficult, very challenging for the accused to be able to defend themselves adequately." Rep. Mike Zabel, D-Delaware County, agreed with Schemel that the General Assembly should tread lightly in tinkering with statutes of limitations but said this is one time where he could support doing so. – **Harrisburg Patriot-News**

Anxious, angry or confused about when you'll get a vaccination? You're not alone. Amid vows that things are about to get better, things so far have been a tangle. Operation Warp Speed became Operation Warped Delivery. A government promise of [20 million vaccinations by Jan. 1](#) dropped like the Times Square New Year's ball, landing on a little more than 2 million.

Since then? States blame feds for delayed distribution and lack of specifics on allocated doses. We've seen reports of hundreds of thousands of unused doses. Feds say states, in the words of U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar, are "too narrowly focused" in administering vaccines. This even though most states followed federal guidelines -- which now are changing. There's more misdirection and finger-pointing than pushes to a fix.

You might think, since the virus and its variants continue to sicken and kill so many, our elected leaders would consider working together, nonstop and near-exclusively, on nothing but a fix. But that would interfere, in Washington, with fighting over getting rid of a president who's about to leave anyway, and, in Harrisburg, with the usual fighting over everything.

So, now what? The feds, in an effort to rebound from shortcomings, say they'll release a giant vaccine supply they were holding to insure those already vaccinated get a required second shot. They say they can do this because of high-level confidence that the vaccine-manufacturing process can cover the second-shot requirement. I wish my level of confidence was as high.

At the same time, [the feds call on states to vaccinate everybody 65 and older](#), sooner rather than later. This is a big deal in Pennsylvania (population 12.8 million) with 2.4 million people 65 and older. It means we've got some distance to go. Especially since, as of this week, fewer than 320,000 Pennsylvanians had been vaccinated. As for everybody else, state Health Secretary Rachael Levine said she recognizes there's "significant interest" in knowing when we can get vaccinated, and that people should contact their health care provider.

Good idea, for those who have one. But 16.2 percent of Pennsylvanians 18 and older have neither a personal doctor nor a health care provider, according to data from the [Kaiser Family Foundation](#), a non-profit, health policy analysis group. That's more than 1.6 million people. But Levine also added a bit of reality, offering this advice: "Sit tight."

No problem really. Pennsylvanians are used to sitting tight when it comes to relying on any positive or reparative action from their government. Let's take the vaccine (don't we wish). It should come as no surprise that the state started the week near the bottom of states nationally, and lowest in the northeast, in the percentage of population to receive the first vaccine dose. [Gov. Wolf calls Pa.'s COVID-19 vaccine rollout 'phenomenal', but data suggests it's behind many states](#). So, I assume when Gov. Tom Wolf referred to our vaccine rollout as "phenomenal," he meant by Pennsylvania standards.

These standards are based on consistently low performance in just about anything you want to rank. How about best-run states? The most-recent [U.S. News & World Report ranking](#), based on metrics including education, environment, economy and fiscal stability, has us near the bottom (41st), and the lowest Northeastern state. Rank indeed.

Best state economy pre-pandemic? The online financial news service 24/7 Wall St. ranks Pennsylvania 37th among states. Best state highway systems? [The 25th Annual Highway Report of the Reason Foundation](#), a libertarian think tank, ranks Pennsylvania 39th. Racial equity in education? The D.C.-based financial website [WalletHub's 2020 rankings puts Pennsylvania 47th in the nation](#). (Think that offers comfort to Black Pennsylvanians who say they distrust the vaccine?)

There's no question the state and nation never faced a challenge as large as responding to this pandemic. Fits and starts during such response are

understandable. But so is angst over what comes next. Our governments haven't exactly won or kept the public trust, before or after COVID-19. Politics at all levels hindered smart, effective public-health policy. And the latest [Quinnipiac University poll](#) says a majority of American voters, 56 percent, expect partisan political divides "to remain the same as they are today." Leadership for better/quicker vaccine distribution, and for selling the science and safety of vaccines, is the order of the day. Let's hope the state and nation puts forth leadership to fill that order. – John Baer's column in **Harrisburg Patriot-News**



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