

State Representative **Greg Harris**



Dear Friends,

As you know, every state in the Union is facing unprecedented financial challenges due to the problems with the economy. Here in Illinois we have particularly tough choices due to the past practice of “balancing” our State’s budget by skipping billions of dollars in payments to our public pension systems. This, coupled with plummeting revenues, leaves us with very few options and some very difficult choices to make.

This year, the legislature instituted a two-tier pension reform for new hires with less generous benefits that reflects our economic reality. Over time this will help reduce our substantial unfunded pension liability. This year and last, the state budget was cut by about \$2.5 billion. We have voted to take unpaid furlough days and cut our own benefits since everyone must make do with less, and it is important that as elected leaders we cut our own pay in tough economic times.

However, to finally reduce our structural deficit and restore our state’s fiscal health once and for all, we are going to have to make painful and unpleasant choices. To close a budget deficit of about \$13 billion on revenues of approximately \$21 billion, we are going to have to not only search out all waste and fraud, but also eliminate or cut back otherwise worthwhile programs. We are going to have to engage in strategic borrowing for cash flow management purposes, and we are going to have to raise revenue.

As I decide how to vote on these tough choices when they are put before me, I value your advice and input. Please call me at (773) 348-3434 to discuss items we can cut, programs you feel should be protected or other advice on handling this financial crisis. It is important to me to be sure that the needs of the district are protected as we move forward in balancing our budget.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Greg Harris', with a stylized, flowing script.

Greg Harris
State Representative • 13th District



Legislative **Update**

PROTECTING NURSING HOME PATIENTS



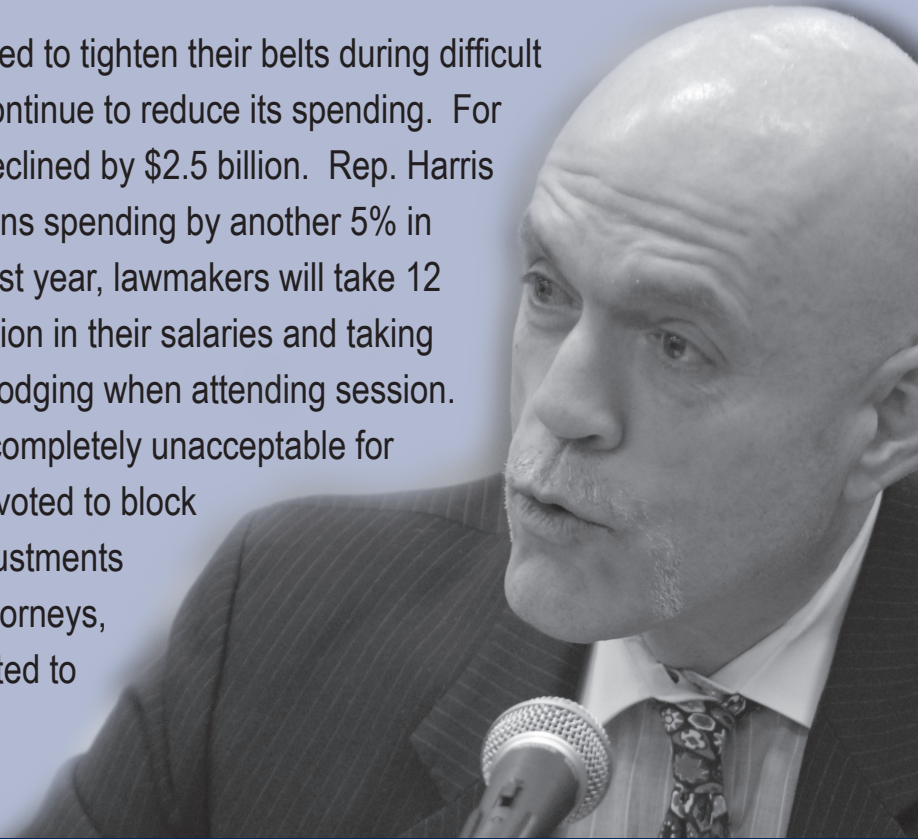
Rep. Harris is a strong supporter of programs and services that keep older adults independent and living in their own homes for as long as possible. Sometimes, however, that is no longer possible and a loved one needs the round-the-clock care that only a nursing facility can provide. That's why it is important that elderly individuals and their family members have assurances that they will be living in a healthy and safe environment.

To make sure that people in nursing homes are safe, Rep. Harris worked to pass Senate Bill 326, which requires nursing homes to increase staffing levels, meet higher standards before admitting patients with serious mental illness and segregate the most dangerous residents in secure units where they would receive more intensive monitoring and treatment.

The measure will move thousands of people who suffer from mental illness or disability out of homes and into less expensive, more effective community treatment programs.

CUTTING BACK ON STATE EXPENSES

Like individual families that have been forced to tighten their belts during difficult economic times, state government must continue to reduce its spending. For the last two budget years, spending has declined by \$2.5 billion. Rep. Harris also voted to reduce state agency operations spending by another 5% in the next budget. In addition, as they did last year, lawmakers will take 12 unpaid furlough days – accepting a reduction in their salaries and taking reduced reimbursements for mileage and lodging when attending session. Rep. Harris also believes that it would be completely unacceptable for lawmakers to receive a pay increase, and voted to block previously scheduled 3% cost-of-living adjustments for General Assembly members, state’s attorneys, constitutional officers, and persons appointed to certain state government offices.



7% SOLUTION EXTENDED FOR COOK COUNTY HOMEOWNERS

Homeowners worried about the prospects of a major increase in property taxes will receive relief under a new measure sponsored by Rep. Harris. Senate Bill 3638 extends the so-called “7% Solution” for another three years. It was originally scheduled to expire this year, which would have walloped many property tax payers who are struggling financially and have suffered a fall in their home values due to the decline of the real estate market. For the first year of the three year extension, the value of the General Homestead Exemption will be set at \$20,000; had the bill not passed it would have reverted to \$5,000.

The measure also creates a Taxpayer Action Board for Cook County and each of the collar counties within the state Department of Revenue. The purpose of the boards is to promote sunshine in assessments and transparency reforms. They will be tasked with studying ways to improve the property assessment process and proposing changes to property tax policies and procedures.

REFORM OF MCCORMICK PLACE AND NAVY PIER

McCormick Place and Navy Pier (McPier) are two of the state's most important economic engines. They help to make Chicago a world-class city and are a major source of economic development and revenue for Illinois. Recently, Chicago has been losing convention business to other, more competitive cities.

Rep. Harris served on the Joint Committee on the Metropolitan Pier and Exposition Authority which produced Senate Bill 28, a complete overhaul of the state's approach to running McPier. The measure replaces current management, constitutes a new board, allows exhibitors to do more themselves, reduces overhead costs on food and electrical service, restructures McPier's debt to save money, and reconstructs the Chicago Convention and Tourism Bureau to make it more efficient and effective. Furthermore, the bill sets in motion plans to expand the McPier-owned hotel next to McCormick Place, renovate the convention center's old east building, and improve Navy Pier's Festival Hall and Skyline Stage. All of this will improve McPier's finances at minimal public cost and help it to compete better with cities across the country.

CLEANING UP GOVERNMENT ETHICS AND CAMPAIGN FINANCE LAWS

To help clean up Illinois politics, Rep. Harris helped pass Public Act 96-0832, a major campaign finance reform initiative that imposes Illinois' first-ever contribution limits on candidates, political parties and political action committees. The new law also mandates more frequent public disclosure of large campaign contributions and makes campaign contribution and expenditure information more open and available to the public.

The new law received the support of some of the state's leading good government advocacy organizations, including CHANGE Illinois! and the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform.

Over the last year, major strides have been made towards changing the old 'business-as-usual' culture, although there is more work to be done. Besides the new campaign finance law, a variety of other ethics measures have been enacted to: establish strict ethics and codes of conduct for members of state boards and commissions appointed by the governor; strengthen the Illinois Freedom of Information Act; improve pension and governmental ethics; tighten rules on purchasing; and improve government transparency with a new accountability portal.

REFORMING THE STATE EMPLOYEE PENSION SYSTEM

During these difficult economic times on both a local and national level, Rep. Harris gave his full backing to a new law, Public Act 96-0889, which makes major reforms to the state employee pension systems and saves Illinois money in the short and long terms. Among the most significant changes: the retirement age is raised to age 67, bringing Illinois in line with Social Security rules; reduced cost-of-living adjustments; standardized and, in some cases, reduced survivor benefits; a prohibition on an individual receiving one government pension while receiving a salary from a different government entity; a reduction of the maximum possible pension a retired government worker can receive.

Rep. Harris was supportive of the new law to rein in past abuses and excesses, make the system more comparable to what is available in the private sector, and improve the system's long-term viability so that it will remain in a position to meet its obligations to current and future retirees. The measure is expected to save the state \$300 million in the next year and as much as \$100 billion in reduced future costs – which will help to ease budget pressures going forward.

The changes will apply not just to state government systems, but also to most local government ones, helping cities, counties and townships to balance their budgets and chart a more fiscally sustainable course.

EXPANSION OF YOUTH SUICIDE PREVENTION PROGRAMS



Recently, suicides have risen to the third leading cause of death among American youth. Because many factors cause children to make these heartbreaking decisions, it is necessary that we better understand their cries for help.

Rep. Harris, who is chairman of the House Youth and Family Committee, passed House Bill 4672 to expand suicide prevention training in schools to better equip teachers and social workers with the necessary tools to identify the warning signs of suicidal behavior in children.