

Legislative Update

By Rob Nixon, Princeton Public Affairs Group

As you are aware, the 2003 elections brought significant changes to the New Jersey Senate and General Assembly. For the first time since 1991 the Democrats control both houses of the Legislature and the Governor's Office. We have been working closely with the leadership, members and staff of the new majorities in the Senate and Assembly to expand the message of the Marine Trades Association of New Jersey to thereby improve the environment for boating and marine businesses in the State. While the current Legislature has only been in office since January, there are several significant legislative issues we have addressed both publicly and behind the scenes.

On these and other related issues, the MTA/NJ have taken an increasingly important role in defining and assisting in their debate:

Boating Safety legislation: We have been working for several months with Senator Ciesla to craft a boater safety and education bill that addresses the most serious issues facing boaters. While Senate Bill 303 and Senate Bill 304 have been introduced, we expect to be meeting with Senator Ciesla in the next few weeks to further improve the legislation. In addition, the Assembly Waterway Safety Task Force released a list of recommendations to improve boating safety and education as well. Many of their recommendations match MTANJ priorities and we expect to meet Task Force Chairman, Assemblyman Bob Smith, to draft the best legislation for boaters and the marine industry.

Assembly Bill 932 (Connors): As you may recall, the MTA/NJ opposed legislation to restrict the operation of power vessels in certain environmentally sensitive areas due to the vagueness of the definitions and its potential scope to restrict a variety of activities. The bill has been reintroduced this session under the aforementioned bill number. We have expressed our concerns with the sponsor once again and will continue to monitor the bill.

Senate Bill 852 (Karcher): The bill appropriates \$1,080,000 to DEP for the Intracoastal Waterway Feasibility Study. These funds are the remaining State share of the project to dredge the Intracoastal Waterway. The bill was recently unanimously released by the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee and I testified in support of the bill before the Committee for the MTA/NJ.

Senate Bill 654/Assembly Bill 918 (Connors/Connors): The bills revise the laws governing the operation of personal watercraft in the State. The legislation is identical to legislation from the last two legislative sessions and it contains language that was agreed upon by the sponsors that was recommended by the National Marine Manufacturers Association. While the bills have not moved out of Committee, we will continue to monitor its future progress.

FY 2005 State Budget: While the entire Budget document has not been drafted and hearings on it are just beginning, we have been working for several weeks to examine issues that may impact on the industry. There is not currently, that we are aware of, any proposal to increase boat taxes or fees or to change the registration fee dedication MTANJ fought for in 2002. The document will continue to evolve between now and the end of the fiscal year on June 30th and we will aggressively track any changes to these issues in the Budget proposal.

The Legislature will recess briefly in April and will meet in May and June before recessing again for the summer. There are therefore several opportunities for legislative activity in the next few months. We will continue to work closely with the MTA/NJ in monitoring, amending or promoting legislation that impact upon the marine industry and boaters in this State.

To learn more about what is happening in the NJ legislature, be sure and join us for the MTA/NJ Annual Conference for "A Legislative Overview Outlining the Political Landscape of Our State and Current Legislative Issues Affecting the Industry" - Presentation by The Princeton Public Affairs Group.