

Building a Strong Homeland Defense

By Senator Bob Smith

Nearly five years after the devastating attacks of September 11, 2001 and with ongoing military engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan, homeland security is an issue at the forefront of nearly every public policy decision. While most of the public attention has been directed toward federal efforts, a great deal is happening right here in New Jersey to prepare our state for any emergency that might occur. In a future crisis, it will be local and state government agencies that are on our front lines. Given our close proximity, not only geographically, but also emotionally, to the 9/11 attacks, being prepared for any future threats is especially important to us here in New Jersey.

Your state government has taken a number of steps in recent years to strengthen our domestic preparedness. After the anthrax scares of 2001, which originated here in New Jersey, bioterrorism has become one of the most prominent homeland security threats. New Jersey has become a national leader in bioterrorism response, with the following measures already in place statewide:

- Established the Medical Emergency and Disaster Preparedness and Response Expert Panel (MEDPREP) to enhance the state's ability to respond to a bioterrorism attack and allocated \$40 million in federal and state funding to implement panel recommendations;
- Implemented the first system in the nation for tracking and managing smallpox vaccinations;
- Established a 24-hour-a-day bioterrorism rapid response team;
- Introduced a two-way radio system connecting all of the state's acute care hospitals.

Measures are also underway to protect our critical infrastructure. One area that is of particular concern to me is ensuring the security of our water supply, and specifically the water supply interconnections. These are the pipes and transfer stations that bring water from aquifers and reservoirs to towns throughout the state. Not only are these interconnections deteriorating because of disrepair, but many studies have shown them to be particularly vulnerable to attack through infrastructure sabotage and contamination. I continue to work on legislation entitled the "Clean Water Drought Mitigation and Water Resource Security Trust Fund Act." This bill would place a small user fee (an average of \$2.40 per year for each household) on water usage that will establish a trust fund dedicated solely to properly protecting the water systems in New Jersey.

Your 17th Legislative District representatives – myself, along with Assemblymen Upendra Chivukula and Joseph Egan – are constantly working to secure funding to assist the municipalities in our district so that our towns can better equip and train the first responders in our communities. In the years since 9/11, our municipalities have received hundreds of thousands of dollars for the purchasing of equipment for our local police, fire and rescue personnel.

I know many of you are concerned about the recent news of a company owned by the government of Dubai, part of the United Arab Emirates, taking over the management of six American ports, including the ports of Newark and New York. The company, Dubai Ports World, originally agreed to a 45-day review of the deal by the U.S. government and Congress is considering legislation regarding the pending takeover. The company announced on March 9 that it will no longer seek to purchase the British company that had previously managed the ports.

Many of you contacted my office and the offices of our federal representatives to express your thoughts on this issue. Know that, should you have any concerns over federal issues, you can always contact your federal representatives to express those concerns at the following telephone numbers:

Senator Frank Lautenberg: (973) 639-8700
Senator Robert Menendez: (973) 645-3030
U.S. Rep. Frank Pallone Jr.: (732) 571-1140

Your federal representatives can also be contacted through the Internet, at www.senate.gov and www.house.gov.

While the threats to our homeland security remain high, officials at all levels of government are working hard to minimize those threats and prepare for any attacks that may occur in the future. You can be confident that New Jersey is at the forefront of domestic preparedness and that we are a national leader in bioterrorism and infrastructure protection programs.

Senator Bob Smith, D-17, represents Franklin Township (Somerset County), Highland Park, Milltown, New Brunswick, North Brunswick and Piscataway in the New Jersey State Senate.