

JOHN A. LAWRENCE
STATE REPRESENTATIVE
13TH LEGISLATIVE DISTRICT



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
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Neil Weaver
Secretary
Governor's Office of
Administration
210 Finance Building
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Uri Monson
Secretary
Governor's Budget Office
19th Floor, Harristown 2
333 Market Street
Harrisburg PA 17101

Reggie McNeil
Acting Secretary
Dept of General Services
515 North Office Building
Harrisburg, PA 17125

Re: State Laboratory

April 5, 2023

Dear Secretaries McNeil, Monson, and Weaver –

I trust all is well.

I write concerning the proposed construction of a new state laboratory. As this effort involves several unrelated state departments, I am directing this inquiry to you in your respective oversight capacities regarding interagency projects.

During last week's House budget hearings, I asked acting Secretary of Health Dr. Debra Bogen a few questions regarding plans to replace the woefully outdated DOH state laboratory in Chester County. To my surprise, Dr. Bogen advised that the new laboratory would not be online until 2028. This is unacceptable.

I had the opportunity to tour the current Health laboratory in 2022 with Representatives Cutler and Rapp. I was impressed by the dedicated career employees who are doing their very best to make-do in the current building. But the working conditions within the facility (in my view) were outdated, bordering on dangerous.

At the time of our tour, we were advised that a new joint state laboratory was in the works with the Department of Health, the Pennsylvania State Police, the Department of Environmental Protection, the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, and the Pennsylvania Department of

Agriculture. We were advised that the new facility would be in the Harrisburg region, which makes a great deal of sense. I applaud the fiscally prudent approach to construct one laboratory for these five agencies to share.

With that in mind, I have a number of serious concerns.

First, Dr. Bogen advised that the new laboratory will be housed at the former Harrisburg State Hospital across from the Farm Show Complex. Various sources have provided conflicting information on this approach – some have said that the laboratory will be housed in a retrofitted historic building, while others contend buildings will be demolished to make way for a brand-new laboratory building.

As one who has a great appreciation for old buildings and historic structures, I applaud creative reuse of older facilities. I can think of a number of appropriate uses for such buildings. A modern, cutting-edge laboratory is not one of them.

Trying to shoehorn competing needs and priorities into the footprint of an old building will not be conducive to success in this instance. Clean rooms, large and heavy equipment, appropriate sanitation and disposal requirements, negative pressure rooms – how will these needs be factored into retrofitting a century-old building? If it is even possible, it will come with added time and costs. If buildings are being demolished, one wonders which will stay, which will go, and how this may limit what can be constructed on the old hospital grounds.

Second, last session I heard the project was delayed as the General Assembly had not appropriated funds. That was addressed in last year's budget, with a \$60 million appropriation in the Capital Budget Act. Now I am being told that is "just a down payment" and that costs are escalating.

Third, I am hearing rumors from folks at various agencies that their needs are not going to be met in the new facility. Concerns that agencies are being shifted up or down in priority have been brought to my attention. Several sources have advised current plans envision almost full occupancy, leaving little room for growth or expansion.

Fourth, a five-year wait for a new facility is unacceptable. One source advised me that, at the current pace, the 2028 date is optimistic.

Late last year, Rhode Island announced plans for a new state laboratory – to be opened by 2025. I might note that they have obtained federal funding for the lab, and that it is being constructed by the private sector. Perhaps we should take note. Certainly, it would be foolish to rush into a building project of this nature without proper planning, but it should not take five years to complete this process.

In my view, the new joint state laboratory should be constructed from the ground-up with the needs of each agency in mind.

With all of this in mind, I am asking your joint departments for the following:

First, I would like to arrange for a tour of the proposed site at the former Harrisburg State Hospital by the end of April. I want to see the buildings for myself and hear from those in charge of this project as to their proposed plans for the facility. I would like to know why the choice was made to deal with the old Harrisburg State Hospital, as opposed to constructing a new facility on Elmerton Avenue or at Fort Indiantown Gap.

Second, I would like to arrange a meeting at my Capitol office to discuss this project. Attendees will include the project managers for the new laboratory, and at least one individual from each agency (DOH, PSP, DEP, DCNR, and PDA.) I want to speak with folks from each agency who work in the trenches and have first-hand knowledge of what their department needs; folks who are familiar with the current laboratories in their respective agencies and the proposed new laboratory. These individuals should be prepared to speak candidly about where things stand, good or bad.

Third, I request documents or request-for-proposals regarding the plans for the new facility, including architectural drawings, needs assessments, square footage requirements, and space allocations within the laboratory, with a particular focus on how things have changed as the project has progressed.

I appreciate your thoughtful review of this matter and look forward to speaking with you in the near future to move forward.

Kind Regards –

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "John Lawrence", is written over a light blue horizontal line.

John Lawrence
State Representative
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

CC: Honorable Bryan Cutler, House Republican Leader

Hon. Marty Causer, Republican Chair, House Environmental Resources & Energy Committee

Hon. Mark Gillen, Republican Chair, House Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committee

Hon. Seth Grove, Republican Chair, House Appropriations Committee

Hon. Dan Moul, Republican Chair, House Agriculture & Rural Affairs Committee

Hon. Kathy Rapp, Republican Chair, House Health Committee

Hon. Brad Roae, Republican Chair, State Government Committee