Is it even possible to write a column at the end of 2020 without saying, "What a year!"? (I assume you know that exclamation point signifies exasperation.)

In the political world, 2020 did not divert from its general path of unwelcome surprises. As I write (in late-November), the President of the United States has not conceded the election, despite the fact that there would have had to have been incompetence or fraud at an unprecedented level to cause him to win.

I guess anything is possible, right? My favorite theory is that Skinny Joey Merlino, the reputed (I don't get to use that word much) Philly mob boss, created 300,000 fake ballots and then voted them all for President-elect Biden. Apparently, according to the Buffalo Chronicle, Merlino is considering “flipping” on Biden if he can get a full pardon from President Trump. According to a confidant (I never get to use that word either) quoted in the story, “He wants a clean record. He wants to fish and hunt on federal lands. He’d really like a job with the National Parks [sic] Service. You need a clean record to get those things.” I think the pardon is doable, but forget about the job. What a year!

At the state level, the election results did offer up some surprises, but nothing that is going to change the balance of power in Pennsylvania politics. As you may know, 2020 was predicted to be a Democratic year for state legislative races. Some prognosticators thought there was a chance that the House would flip to the Democrats and that the Democrats had an outside shot of winning the Senate.

So much for polls and prognostication. The Republicans maintained control of the House 113-90. They held seats in the Southeast that were predicted to go Democratic and picked up seats in in various regions of the state, including one in the Southeast. The big shocker in the election was that the Democratic Leader in the House, Rep. Frank Dermody, lost a seat he has held for 30 years. As you know, the PBA is strictly nonpartisan. We build and maintain relationships with members on both sides of the aisle. I tell people all the time that as a lobbyist in Harrisburg, I really don’t think about legislators in a partisan manner. I mostly think about them as nice or not nice people. Rep. Dermody is one of the nice ones, and I wish him well.

The Senate may see a slight increase in Republicans with a pick-up of one seat that is still too close to call. The current vote total is 65,979 to 65,978! Every vote counts! The Republicans lost a seat in the Southeast when the incumbent Sen. Tom Killion was defeated. Sen. Killion is also in the nice category and even was the prime sponsor of a major PBA victory from last session — digital assets — and I wish him well.

After the election, the four caucuses — House Democrats and Republicans and Senate Democrats and Republicans — held their leadership elections. House Republicans reelected their leadership team from last session (which ended on Nov. 30, 2020). Rep. Bryan Cutler, assuming the full House elects him when they return to session in January — which is highly likely — will retain his position as speaker. Speaker Cutler (he is now technically speaker-elect) is a PBA member from Lancaster County. The majority leader is Rep. Kerry Benninghoff from Centre County.

The Senate Republicans elected Sen. Jake Corman (Centre County) as president pro tempore. Sen. Corman was the majority leader last session. Sen. Kim Ward (Westmoreland County) was elected majority leader. She is the first female majority leader in the history of the Pennsylvania General Assembly.

The Senate Democratic leadership remains the same with Sen. Jay Costa (Allegheny County) serving as the minority leader, Sen. Anthony Williams (Philadelphia) as the whip, and Sen. Vincent Hughes (Montgomery and Philadelphia counties) as the chair of the Appropriations Committee.
The House Democrats went on to make history as well when they elected Rep. Joanna McClinton of Philadelphia to be the first female and first Black minority leader.

All of these leaders in their respective caucuses are well known to PBA’s Legislative Department and to many in PBA leadership. Indeed, almost all of them have participated in some PBA function over the years. We wish them all the best as Pennsylvania continues to face very difficult times.

A quick word on the “row offices”: Attorney General Josh Shapiro won reelection by a much tighter margin than was anticipated. He is expected to run for governor in 2022. Both the auditor general and treasurer seats flipped to Republicans. In another historic milestone, PBA member Timothy DeFoor became the first Black auditor general in the history of the commonwealth. In fact, DeFoor is the first person of color to win a statewide election.

2020 has been a year of great suffering and turmoil. Let’s hope and pray (if you are so inclined) that 2021 will be a much better year! 😊

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