

## In aftermath of legislative session, it's worth noting some good was done

**John Burbank; News Tribune columnist**

With all the smoke from the pundits about what the Legislature failed to do in the session that ended two weeks ago, it is hard to see what the Legislature did do. But sometimes progress comes without fanfare or grandstanding.

So it was with the 2002 Legislature. While most of us were focused on the recession and how the Legislature could close the resulting holes in the state budget, others were looking a little further down the road.

Such diligent work culminated in Olympia with the passage of a [Family Care bill](#) that garnered strong bipartisan support: 96-0 in the House and 41-4 in the Senate. This bill enables workers to use their sick leave to care not only for themselves and their children but also for other relatives - spouses, parents, grandparents and parents-in-law.

It is an important step forward in enabling workers to balance work and family responsibilities while helping businesses hold on to good employees. And thanks to the leadership of the House Labor and Commerce Committee chairman, Rep. Steve Conway (D-Tacoma) and Senate sponsor Karen Keiser (D-Des Moines), among others, it is now awaiting the governor's signature.

Victims of domestic violence also got an important boost from the Legislature. Before this year, if you were a victim of abuse and you had to leave your job to escape, you could not receive unemployment benefits. So even if you quit your job to flee for your life, you could not receive unemployment benefits.

No more. Thanks to legislative action, victims of domestic violence who are forced to leave their jobs now will be entitled to unemployment benefits, ensuring a cushion of economic security for them and their children while they rebuild their lives. For years the Legislature has been unable to agree upon how to finance the new Tacoma Narrows Bridge. But thanks to the tenacity of a native son of Bremerton - House Speaker Frank Chopp - the Legislature broke the logjam this year. The new bridge is on a fast track, with a guarantee for public financing, public oversight over tolls and public ownership of the bridge.

This will save tollpayers and taxpayers between \$400 million and \$1 billion compared to the previously considered scheme of private financing and private control over a vital public resource. The Legislature also laid some important groundwork for future public policy progress. The [post-Enron climate](#) has made everyone pretty sensitive to what responsible pension policy is. Some guidelines are that retirement plans should benefit all workers, not just the folks at the top; they should be available for all workers; and that the administrative barriers to retirement plans for small businesses should be removed.

This year, 18 legislators sponsored a groundbreaking initiative for [universal access to retirement accounts](#). The bill did not make it through all the legislative hoops, but it does set the stage for future policy work to create and insure pensions for all Washington workers.

This is a precedent-setting endeavor that has avoided partisan wrangling, with Republicans from both sides of the Cascades joining with Democrats, including Patricia Lantz of Gig Harbor and Chris Hurst of Enumclaw,

to sponsor this bill. The Frank Russell Company of Tacoma has also provided insight and encouragement for this initiative.

We can hope that this first step will lead in the near future to genuine opportunities for all workers to save for their retirement. We can be grateful that in the last-minute rush the Legislature did not proceed with the misguided notion of eliminating the estate tax. Most would agree that our tax system is a mess and puts far too much of a burden on those who can least afford it. While we're cutting funding for public education and vital public services, it makes no sense to give up one of the few taxes that fall only on those who can best afford them. By its inaction, the House of Representatives agreed. In the midst of recriminations about the Legislature, it makes sense to not only judge the opportunities lost, but also to recognize the good news from the labors of the Olympia. This is what objective Monday-morning quarterbacking is all about.

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John Burbank, executive director of the [Economic Opportunity Institute](#), writes every other Wednesday. Write to him in care of the institute at 4738 11th Avenue NE, Seattle, WA 98105. His e-mail address is [John@eoionline.org](mailto:John@eoionline.org).

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