What The Wall Street Law Means For You

The Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act signed by President Obama increases oversight of the financial system and introduces vital safeguards to limit the reckless behavior responsible for the financial meltdown.

Goldman Sachs, AIG and other large financial institutions deployed 2,000 lobbyists and spent $500 million in an effort to weaken the law. Because of your support, Georgia PIRG, along with our national federation and the Americans for Financial Reform coalition, successfully lobbied for a bill that will protect consumer rights.

Health Care Debate Moves To Georgia

President Obama’s health care reform law promises improved care, lower costs and greater access to coverage. But in order for Georgians to see those benefits, state policy-makers need to implement reforms with an eye toward protecting consumers. To make that happen, Georgia PIRG has created a guide for policy-makers whose decisions will determine whether we get real reform, or the same high-cost, low-value plans under a new name.

The bill also puts in place the oversight necessary to prevent another financial crisis and regulate the derivatives market. Finally, the bill will allow the government to step in and safely shut down failing financial institutions, which means an end to taxpayer bailouts.

Making Health Care Work

STANDING UP FOR MAIN STREET—At Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid’s press conference on May 5, Georgia PIRG’s Gary Kalman (back left) and John Krieger (back right) presented Sen. Reid and others with more than 125,000 petitions from PIRG members nationwide, urging the Senate to pass strong reform in Wall Street.
Tax & Budget

**BP Profits While Consumers Pay**

All of us are paying for BP’s oil spill—and in more ways than lost livelihoods and environmental damage—Georgians are also paying for it with our taxes. And, unlike the oil spill, which was eventually capped, this costly tax leak is growing.

As Georgia PIRG senior analyst Phineas Baxandall reported in Huffington Post, a recent court ruling allows oil and gas companies to organize themselves in a way that exempts them from paying corporate income taxes while counting the taxes they should be paying toward higher utility rates charged to rate payers.

This means the oil and gas industry profits while consumers lose out twice: First, this phantom tax shows up in higher monthly utility bills and higher gas prices. Second, taxpayers end up covering for lost state tax revenue.

Georgia PIRG has brought media attention to the issue and is working to make sure Congress closes this egregious loophole.

**New Voters Project**

Building Civic Engagement

In 2008, 2.2 million more young people voted than in the previous presidential election. The prediction is that many, if not most, of those young voters won’t return for this year’s midterm elections. But the PIRG New Voters Project is mobilizing to defy that expectation, putting organizers on 60 college campuses across the country.

More than a third of the U.S. Senate, the entire U.S. House of Representatives, and 35 gubernatorial seats are up for grabs this fall. Across the country, our nonpartisan youth voter mobilization effort has helped register 42,000 young people to vote. To get them to the polls, we will make 100,000 personalized voting reminders on Election Day.

**Public Health**

**A $70 Million Campaign Against National Security**

The Clorox Company, Kuehne Chemical, and JCI Jones Chemicals each own manufacturing facilities that together put more than 12 million Americans in danger of injury or death in the event of an accident. One Clorox facility in Connecticut endangers 15,000 people. That’s one of the findings of a new Georgia PIRG report, “Chemical Insecurity.”

The 14 such companies that, nationwide endanger the most people have also spent almost $70 million over the last two years lobbying committees with jurisdiction over chemical security legislation. The political action committees (PACs) of these same companies, and the PACs of their trade associations, have given more than $2 million to political campaigns during the last two election cycles.

We’re working against such moneyed interests to pass the Chemical and Water Security Act. “It’s the influence of corporate interests in our political process that has kept this commonsense legislation from becoming law,” said Lisa Gilbert, Georgia PIRG’s democracy advocate. “When public safety takes a backseat to money, it’s time to take a hard look at our influence culture and work toward getting money out of politics.”

**Transportation**

**Public Transit Gaining Steam**

Several factors are making it clear that we need to invest in better public transportation. Between rising gas prices and the oil spill in the Gulf, it’s becoming obvious that we can’t afford to rely so heavily on our cars.

Recently, one of the biggest car-dependent cities in the country, Los Angeles, committed to funding 12 new public transportation projects over the next 30 years. Georgia needs to set its sights on an equally ambitious project.

Georgia PIRG is working so Georgians can enjoy all the benefits that modern public transit has to offer. In California, for example, the new rail system is estimated to create 166,000 jobs and cut car travel by 200 million miles a year.

Be An Advocate For Georgia’s Future With Georgia PIRG’s Planned Giving Program.

You can be remembered as someone who cared enough to leave a legacy of activism on behalf of Georgia consumers and ensure the future health of our state’s democracy by making a bequest to Georgia PIRG.

For information, call: 1-800-841-7299, or e-mail plannedgiving@georgiapirg.org.
Safer Food, Healthier Kids

Higher Standards For School Lunch

Most manufacturers of canned food still line containers with the hormone-disrupting chemical bisphenol-A. Some beef sold in the United States is processed with ammonia. And this summer, Kellogg’s was forced to recall 28 million boxes of Corn Pops, Honey Smacks, Froot Loops and Apple Jacks tainted by petroleum byproducts.

Clearly, we need far greater assurance than we have today that the food we serve our children is safe for their growing bodies and long-term health.

In the United States, 76 million people get sick every year from food; 325,000 go to the hospital, and 5,000 people die from foodborne bacteria like salmonella and E. coli. This fall, Georgia PIRG is taking advantage of two major opportunities that will help make our food safer.

The first is a bill to overhaul the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for the first time in 70 years. The bill, which would give the FDA the authority to inspect food processing facilities and issue mandatory recalls of unsafe food, passed the House more than a year ago. Georgia PIRG will urge the Senate to follow suit.

The second opportunity is to increase the safety and quality of food served in the National School Lunch Program.

How Safe Are School Lunches?

Unfortunately, there’s a lot to improve. For example, lower standards for the poultry served in schools mean cafeterias often serve low quality meat that has a higher risk of carrying salmonella. Further, in the event of a recall, it can take government officials a week or more to notify schools if they are serving food that has been recalled.

Last May, after public outcry from Georgia PIRG activists and other organizations, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Secretary Tom Vilsack set higher standards for ground beef served in schools.

Now, Georgia PIRG’s federal public health advocate, Elizabeth Hitchcock, is lobbying Congress and the Obama administration to improve the safety of food served in school cafeterias. Specifically, we’re calling on the USDA to set science-based safety standards for all school food, and improve tracking and notification to prevent schools from serving recalled food.

Some food industry giants have been powerful opponents of change, which is why Georgia PIRG has reached out to thousands of Georgians to help us. In collaboration with 20 other state PIRGs, we’ve amassed the support of parents, teachers and county officials and we’ve called on first lady Michelle Obama, who has used her influence to promote nutrition and healthy foods, to weigh in directly with the USDA.

To Our Members

Dear Georgia PIRG member,

This year’s elections will give us the first glimpse of what the Supreme Court’s recent decision to overturn decades of campaign finance law will mean for our democracy.

At the time that I am writing this, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce has committed $300 million to influence the November elections. Big corporations like Target and Best Buy have chosen to enter the electoral game in ways they never could have dreamed of before the court ruling. And with campaign contributions left unchecked, I fear corporate interests will be the ones to which politicians feel accountable. That could have dire consequences for so many issues that pit consumers against powerful interests. Take, for example, health care and the power of insurance companies.

We’re working to increase disclosure requirements and give shareholders more say in corporate giving, but ultimately, we are convinced that our democracy will work best if we can overturn the Supreme Court’s decision.

That’s not a small task, but it’s vitally important. That’s why I’m glad to know you’re supporting us financially and with your actions.

As the articles in this newsletter show, your support truly does make a difference.

Sincerely,

Jeff Bernstein
Policy Analyst For Georgia PIRG
info@georgiapirg.org

FOOD FOR THOUGHT—Georgia PIRG Federal Public Health Advocate Elizabeth Hitchcock met with USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack to discuss improving safety standards for the food served in school lunches.
This Trillion In Savings Is On Us

Earlier this year, President Obama announced that he would form a “debt commission” to balance the federal budget by 2015. In response, Georgia PIRG Tax and Budget Reform Advocate Nicole Tichon identified more than $1 trillion in waste-ful government contracts and revenue lost to corporate tax loopholes. In June, she went before the commission to make her recommendations.

In the months that followed, Congress and the Obama administration have enacted some of Georgia PIRG’s recommendations, including an end to the practice of subsidizing private student loan companies in favor of direct lending from the government.

Tichon kept digging, and in June released a plan for how the government could recover an additional trillion dollars by, among others means:

- Requiring the military to end orders for obsolete parts and supplies, which would save $185 billion by 2015.
- Instituting a fee of less than half a percent on speculative financial transactions, which would generate $884.5 billion while encouraging more stable investing.
- Ending subsidies to the oil and gas industry, which would save $19 billion.

In her testimony, Tichon said, “If the government moves forward with an aggressive plan to hold itself accountable, we could reduce the deficit and have a better government.”

Georgia PIRG’s Mission
When consumers are cheated or the voices of ordinary citizens are drowned out by special interest lobbyists, Georgia PIRG speaks up and takes action. We uncover threats to public health and well-being and fight to end them, using the time-tested tools of investigative research, media exposés, grassroots organizing, advocacy and litigation. Georgia PIRG’s mission is to deliver persistent, result-oriented public interest activism that protects consumers, encourages a fair, sustainable economy, and fosters responsive, democratic government.

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