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WEST CHESTER

ROARING IN SECRET



The new museum exhibit at West Chester University brings the 1920s to life. SUBMITTED PHOTO/WCU

WCU brings 1920s to life with ‘Subversion and Change in the 1920s’ exhibit

By Bill Rettew
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WEST CHESTER — Let’s say you’re curious about what it was like 100 years ago.

Now you’ve got the chance to see what it looked like during the 1920s at West Chester University’s boldest exhibit to date, as the school’s Museum of Anthropology presents, “Roaring in Secret: Subversion and Change in the 1920s”

The exhibition is located in the museum’s Lower Gallery, in the Old Library, at 775 S. Church St.

History comes alive as you stroll through the museum, while viewing life-size dioramas and actual period artifacts and some reproductions from the 1920s.

“It’s super fun to get the big artifacts and pieces that help to tell the story,” said Thomas Haughey, associate professor or theater and museum designer. “This is theater.”

“It is a stage prop. It’s the immersive world we build on stage.”

“Under the leadership of Museum Director Dr. Michael A. Di Giovine, professor of anthropology and museum studies, and Haughey, 15 undergraduate and graduate museum studies students



This is a view of a 1920s bedroom, with all period pieces. SUBMITTED PHOTO/WCU

worked for nearly a year to create an immersive and engaging exhibition that explores the simultaneously secret and subversive nature of the 1920s — from its art, music, and literature to its technological inventions; from its economic boom to its bust; from suffrage to flapper culture; Prohibition and crime to immigration,” reads a release issued by the university,

The artifacts illustrate innovations, inventions, and pop cultural movements in the 1920s that fostered lasting change in American society. You can visit a 1920s parlor, kitchen, bedroom, view the fashions of the day and even walk through a Speakeasy.

According to the release: “Each room tells a story of a real person who lived during the 1920s: a flapper girl, a struggling immigrant, a middle-class boy.

Everything seen inside is an authentic artifact from the period. They come from the families who loaned or donated their artifacts to the museum and each room tells the story of a family:

- Toys, flapper dresses, and books from the Schlendorf Vintage Collection, donated to the museum by Mary and Neil Schlendorf of Wyckoff, NJ.
- Rare phonographs, radios, and jewelry on loan from the Di Giovine-Harwood family of Langhorne, PA;
- Dresses, letters, and personal effects from the Morrill family of Portland, OR;
- Film equipment, photographs, and fashion from the Nammavong family of Upper Darby, PA.
- A luxurious, beaded flapper wedding dress on loan from Malena’s Vintage

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‘Inflation does not retire’

Pa. House passes pension
increase for oldest retired
teachers, government workers

By Zack Hoopes
PENNLIVE.COM

The Pennsylvania House of Representatives has again passed a bill that would give a cost-of-living raise to roughly 59,000 retired teachers and state employees whose pension benefits have been held flat since 2002.

The issue is one of the many idiosyncrasies of the State Employees Retirement System (SERS) and the Pennsylvania School Employees Retirement Systems (PSERS), the pension funds that provide retirement pay for state government workers and local school district teachers, respectively.

In 2001, Pennsylvania passed Act 9, which gave significant ongoing benefit boosts to current public employees — and which caused significant problems once the increased costs were fully phased in amid the 2008 financial crisis.

Those who had already retired, however, received only a one-time increase to their pension payouts in 2002. For the past 23 years, those retirees have not seen any further increases in their pension checks, even as inflation has reduced the power of a 2002 dollar to about 56 cents today.

There are 37,294 pre-Act 9 retirees who are still alive to receive benefits from PSERS, according to the fund’s actuarial data. Their average age is 84, and their average pension benefit is \$19,219 per year.

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Pa. lawmakers want tax, rent rebates to get to seniors, others more quickly

By Ford Turner
PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE

HARRISBURG — The half million-plus Pennsylvanians who are eligible for rebates of up to \$1,000 on taxes or rent may get those payments months earlier under a bipartisan bill advanced by a House committee on Wednesday.

Rebates under the Property Tax Rent Rebate program have always been sent out by the state after July 1. Democratic Rep. Johanny Cepeda-Freytiz, a sponsor of the bill approved unanimously by the House Finance Committee, said it would make it possible for the payments to go out as soon as the state

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DOWNINGTOWN SCHOOLS

Students ‘connect’ with police officers

MediaNews Group

EAST BRANDYWINE — Downingtown Middle School recently hosted a collaborative community event with its “Making Connections” program, an initiative aimed at building meaningful relationships between students and Chester County law enforcement.

This program reflects Downingtown Area School District’s (DASD) commitment to fostering trust and mutual

respect through open dialogue and community engagement, according to a press release.

Students participated in a discussion with Cpl. Kelly MacIntyre of the Pennsylvania State Police and Lt. Ken Michels of the West Brandywine Police Department. The officers shared insights into the responsibilities of law enforcement and spoke with students about the importance of staying safe and responsible online.

The program, held in collaboration with DASD’s Office of Student Relations and School Climate (SRSC), provided students with an opportunity to ask questions, share perspectives, and strengthen community connections.

“It’s important for students and law enforcement to come together to strengthen our community,” said Justin Brown, DASD Director of SRSC. “These conversations are essential to our mission of creating a sense of belonging

for all students. We’re proud of everyone who took part and are grateful for their dedication to building stronger relationships.”

The “Making Connections” program continues to be an essential part of DASD’s commitment to fostering positive relationships and open dialogue between students and law enforcement, creating a foundation of trust and

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Cpl. Kelly MacIntyre of the Pennsylvania State Police, left, and West Brandywine police Lt. Ken Michels join students for a meaningful discussion on law enforcement and online safety during the Making Connections program at 6y777ghvDowningtown Middle School. COURTESY PHOTO

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Posing in the Speakeasy at the 1920s WCU museum exhibit are Michael Di Giovine, left, Emily Nammavong, Mary Joy Moyer and Thomas Haughey. **BILL RETTEW/ MEDIANEWS GROUP**

EXHIBIT

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Boutique in West Chester Borough.

■ Memorabilia tracing the 1927 transition of West Chester Normal School into West Chester State Teachers College are also on display.”

But when you think you’ve seen it all, a secret passage-way leads to a hidden Speakeasy where crime bosses, crooked politicians, flappers, and even everyday citizens subverted the Prohibition rules banning alcohol and gambling.

There are original bottles of unopened bootleg liquor, doctors’ prescriptions for medicinal whiskey, and a working 1920s slot machine. Go ahead! Try your luck and put a nickel in.

View never-before-seen photos from Dan Slater, author of *The Incorruptibles: A True Story of Kingpins, Crime Busters, and the Birth of the American Underworld*. There are also flicks from the day running constantly.

Much of the Speakeasy exhibit is interactive.

“We let people play,” Haughey said. “It’s almost a Please Touch Museum.”

Visitors can also try their hand at playing a real theremin, a 1920s instrument that uses electricity and magnetism to make a unique warbling sound that is almost creepy. You have control over the “music” that this one-of-a-kind instrument emits.

The Jazz Age is in full gear, and the speakeasy also features several authentic instruments courtesy of the Hartenberger World Music Collection, including a rare Royal Slide Saxophone, an instrument invented in the 1920s that is half trombone, half sax. Only a few exist in the world, and this one is the only copper-plated one in existence, according to the release.

“This is by far the most ambitious exhibition we have ever mounted,” said Dr. Di Giovine. “In addition to curating more than 100 artifacts, some of them quite rare and quite large, the students wanted this to be immersive, as if you were stepping back in time.

“Our museum designer and co-instructor for the class, Tom Haughey, really got to work on making these ideas a reality,” he said. “It’s no wonder that the exhibition takes on the feel of the theatrical set rather than a traditional, historical museum.

“This is largely his vision, and I couldn’t be happier with how it turned out.”

Mary Joy Moyer ’23, the museum’s graduate assistant curator, worked on previous exhibitions as a student curator and said that, with the



West Chester University student Emily Nammavong and 1920s clothing from the museum exhibit “Roaring in Secret: Subversion and Change in the 1920s.” **BILL RETTEW/ MEDIANEWS GROUP**



West Chester University professor Michael Di Giovine takes a spin on a 1920s slot machine. **BILL RETTEW/MEDIANEWS GROUP**



A full-size diorama at the new 1920s exhibit at the WCU museum. **BILL RETTEW/MEDIANEWS GROUP**

new exhibition, she “learned more about the behind-the-scenes aspects of all the jobs there are. This included helping with hard decision-making that every curator faces.”

She supported the other student curators and interpreted her role as a liaison between them and Dr. Di Giovine to streamline the creative process and communication. Moyer earned her undergraduate degree at the University in history with minors in museum studies and criminal justice and is on track to earn her master’s in history in 2025.

Emily Nammavong is a senior Anthropology student and discovered many of the

artifacts displayed in the exhibits.

“I learned how to find things at affordable prices and in good condition,” she said.

She said that a lot of the 100-year old clothing was pretty tattered and needed sewing and ironing, but in the end the clothing looks museum quality.

She raided the university’s special collection section, borrowed from the Chester County History Center, bought online on sites such as eBay, took loans from other museums, shopped antique shops and local people dug into their basements and attics.

Moyer was pleased with how the replica wallpaper turned out. The student generated wallpaper was stenciled by art students and adds much to the exhibit.

The museum is open Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. during the academic year. The spring semester runs through May 10. The fall 2025 semester runs from Aug. 25-Dec. 10.

To view a virtual exhibition with additional content (hear someone playing the Royal Slide Sax! Learn more about the donor families during the 1920s!), can be accessed directly — along with the opening hours. A 3D virtual exhibition, which includes additional content (hear the Royal Slide Sax in action! Listen to a 1920s true-crime story by the award-winning author Michael Wolraich!) can be found at www.wcupa.edu/RoaringInSecret.

PENSION

From Page 1

Benefits and demographics for the 21,596 surviving pre-Act 9 SERS retirees are roughly similar — although those numbers can change quickly between financial reporting periods.

In the 17 months since the House passed the same bill last session, roughly 10,000 pre-Act 9 beneficiaries have died, according to bill author Rep. Steve Malagari, D-Montgomery County.

“That’s 10,000 individuals who didn’t get the help they so deserve because some on the other side of the building here decided not to act,” Malagari said, referencing the Republican-controlled state Senate not fielding the bill before the 2023-24 session expired.

“We love to talk about supporting the aging population and taking care of those who take care of us. Now is the time to do that,” Malagari continued, adding that “inflation does not retire. Neither should our responsibility to those who served the public good.”

Malagari’s bill would increase pension benefits for pre-Act 9 retirees on a sliding scale of between 15% and 24.5%, with those who retired in the year immediately before Act 9 receiving the lowest boost, and those who retired before July 1982 receiving the largest. The cost of these benefits is to be amortized into the pension math over a period of 10 years.

The bill passed Wednesday afternoon on a vote of 131-to-72, with all the chamber’s Democratic majority and a handful of Republicans in favor.

Many GOP members expressed financial concerns, given that the added costs are not included Gov. Josh Shapiro’s budget proposal.



The state Capitol in Harrisburg on March 18. **DAN GLEITER/ PENNLIVE**

“This is something that we must work on when we see the big picture of the budget. Governor Shapiro did not present this in his budget proposal,” said Rep. Jesse Topper, R-Bedford, the Republican floor leader, and as such “we have not identified how it will be paid for.”

Topper said his father is a retired teacher who is among the pre-Act 9 retirees in question.

“To say I do not respect the work that he did — either in raising me or the job he did for thousands of students throughout his career — simply based on the fact that I do not know where the money is coming from to pay for this piece of legislation is inaccurate,” Topper said.

Pension fund financing is based on a number of tricky projections — namely how long a given population of retirees will live, how much money working employees will be contributing and what benefit they’ll accrue, and how well the fund’s investments will do.

Based on current estimates, the added benefits would increase the state’s total unfunded pension liability by about \$979 million. The first year of rolling this into the pension calculations would increase the 2026-27 fund contributions by \$100.5 million for

PSERS and another \$45.2 million for SERS.

The new benefits would continue to be amortized into the actuarial math over a decade, with the marginal cost in any given year varying depending on actual fund experience.

Not all of those costs would be borne by the state budget, given that a little less than half of the PSERS contributions would come from school districts.

Some Republicans also questioned why the state would spend the money on workers who have both a pension and Social Security benefits.

“Why are we giving it to people who already make twice as much as the others? The most impoverished seniors are the ones that only have Social Security, not the ones that have Social Security and a PSERS pension or a SERS pension,” said Rep. Brad Roae, R-Crawford County.

But the fact that federally funded benefits are paltry, Democrats said, shouldn’t be used as an excuse to not increase state-funded benefits for those who need it.

“I think it’s a false choice,” said Rep. Emily Kinkead, D-Allegheny County. “We need to get beyond this rhetoric that says some benefits to some people is an offense to others.”

REBATES

From Page 1

approves the application and verifies the money is available.

That means they could get in the hands of recipients several months earlier.

“Whoever is qualified and eligible is going to get this money anyway,” said Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz, of Berks County.

The rebates go to people 65 and older and those with disabilities, two of the state’s most economically vulnerable groups. The original law passed in 1971 got a major expansion in 2023, when Gov. Josh Shapiro signed a bill that raised the net income thresholds to be part of the program from \$35,000 to \$45,000 for property taxpayers and from \$15,000 to \$45,000 for renters.

A cost-of-living adjustment made to those limits put the net income threshold at \$46,520 this year. Supplemental rebates are available for the most needy.

The 2023 change to the law made an additional

175,000 people eligible. Now, according to Finance Committee Chairman Steve Samuelson, D-Northampton, more than 520,000 residents are eligible. About half are people 65 and older, he said, and about half are disabled.

The bill to speed up rebates now goes to the full House for consideration. If it becomes law this year, it will not affect applications for 2025 rebates, which are already being processed, but would govern the 2026 rebate cycle.

The concept had immediate bipartisan support, including from Republican Reps. Eric Davanzo of Westmoreland County and Jeremy Shaffer of Allegheny County. “Why make people wait?” asked Mr. Davanzo. Mr. Shaffer called it a “timing issue” and said, “These are people who would already be getting checks.”

Allison Morgan, Department of Revenue executive deputy secretary, told the committee last month that about \$319 million in rebates were distributed last year. She said sending them out

sooner would not present a problem to the department as long as it has the money.

The department, she said, hired more full-time staff and some part-time staff to deal with the larger volume generated by the program expansion. In addition, she said, the department held about 300 events at Area Agency on Aging facilities and senior centers to help applicants and raise awareness.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz, Mr. Davanzo and Mr. Samuelson are co-prime sponsors of the bill.

Mr. Samuelson said one of the most compelling arguments for the quicker turnaround time is the way the department handles tax refunds. He said it receives the tax return, processes it and reviews it, and then — if the taxpayer is due a refund — delivers the refund.

“There is no waiting period,” Mr. Samuelson said. On tax and rebates, he added, “The Department of Revenue certainly has the cash flow. The state has the money. Let’s get it in the hands of the seniors sooner.”

STUDENTS

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mutual understanding, the release stated.

“I hope students and

community members continue working together to create an environment of kindness and understanding,” Brown added. “These conversations lay the groundwork for a more

connected and informed community.”

For more information about the Making Connections program, visit DASD’s Office of SRSC at www.dasd.org/srsc.

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