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FOUR-BILL PACKAGE TO REDUCE GUN CRIME RECEIVES FINAL LEGISLATIVE APPROVAL

Measures Would Create New Penalties for Gun Running, Smuggling & Purchasing

(TRENTON) – A package of bills Assemblymen Neil M. Cohen, Gordon M. Johnson, Louis M. Manzo, and Bob Gordon sponsored to reduce illegal gun trafficking in the state by creating new penalties and updating existing laws received final legislative approval today in the General Assembly.

The measures would impose tougher penalties for gun trafficking and public possession of illegal firearms, and they would strengthen the law concerning the reporting of lost or stolen firearms.

“A disproportionate number of gun-related crimes in New Jersey are committed with weapons purchased outside the state, yet we have no law on the books specifically against gun trafficking,” said Cohen (D-Union). “That needs to change before more lives are needlessly lost.”

The first measure (A-2697), which would make gun trafficking illegal in New Jersey, passed by a vote of 80 to 0.

Under the bill, anyone who knowingly transports, ships or otherwise brings firearms into New Jersey with the intent to illegally sell or give them to another individual would be guilty of gun trafficking and would face penalties of up to \$150,000 in fines and 10 years in jail.

Currently, gun trafficking is usually prosecuted as a violation of the state’s licensing statutes, which carries lesser penalties of up to \$10,000 in fines and 18 months in jail.

A second measure (A-3035) would make it illegal to knowingly carry an unlawful firearm – concealed or otherwise – in a public place. Violators would be subject to penalties of up to \$150,000 in fines and 10 years in jail. The Assembly passed the measure 60 to 15.

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“Many criminals, especially gang members, use guns as a status symbol and a mark of power,” said Gordon (D-Bergen). “By creating strict new penalties for carrying illegal weapons in public, we remove some of that power and hopefully get some weapons off the street.”

A third measure (A-4620) would help curtail “straw purchasers” – individuals who buy weapons in bulk and later sell them on the black market.

Currently, when a weapon used in a crime is traced back to a legal purchaser, the purchaser can claim the weapon was lost or stolen, thereby avoiding culpability for the crime. This loophole effectively allows straw purchasers to sell weapons without fear of repercussions.

“When it comes to stopping gun crimes, law enforcement needs all the help it can get,” said Manzo (D-Hudson). “Mandating immediate reporting of gun thefts will help discourage straw purchasers from running guns on the black market.”

The bill would require the legal owner of a firearm to report the loss or theft of that firearm to local authorities or the State Police within 36 hours of discovery. Failure to report the loss or theft would result in fines of \$500 for a first offense and \$1,000 for all subsequent offenses. The measure passed 66 to 11.

“Honest gun owners who have a firearm stolen have absolutely nothing to fear from this reporting standard,” said Johnson (D-Bergen), the chair of the Assembly Law and Public Safety Committee. “Criminals, however, will face a tough choice – either provide valuable intelligence to the police or be stuck paying a hefty fine.”

A final measure (A-2602) would regulate the sale of handgun ammunition in New Jersey. It was introduced following a December 2006 hearing and a February 2007 report by the State Commission of Investigation (SCI) calling for regulation of ammunition sales in New Jersey as proof that legislative action is needed to properly address the problem.

Under the bill, only individuals who possess and display a valid firearms purchaser identification card, a certified copy of a permit to purchase a handgun, a valid permit to carry a handgun, a valid New Jersey hunting license, a valid Collector of Curios and Relics license, or valid documentation identifying them as a federal, state, or local law enforcement officer would be allowed to purchase and possess handgun ammunition in New Jersey. Exceptions would be made for individuals purchasing and using handgun ammunition at a licensed target range. The measure passed the Assembly by a vote of 55-20-2.

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“Bullets are too easy to obtain in New Jersey,” said Manzo (D-Hudson). “Government officials, law enforcement officials, and confidential informants alike have all reported instances of minors, felons, gang members, and ‘straw men’ purchasing thousands of rounds of ammunition from the same vendor – with minimal identification. The need to enact legislation mandating stricter ammunition regulations in New Jersey has never been more clear.”

The bills now head to the Governor, who may sign or veto them.