

A View from the House

By Representative Doug Holt

Last week, we passed 18 pieces of legislation. Most of them were of minor import: some additional retirement plan updates, the naming of bridges and roads in honor of Georgians who were of renown to their communities, and some administrative/policy setting bills for various state agencies and local governments.

We passed several bills that I mentioned in previous columns. First was HB 950, the bill that is intended to protect public school students or public employees who make personal, verbal expressions of goodwill about public holidays to others. It had been dubbed the “Merry Christmas” bill -- and while it seemed like a frivolous law because it simply re-affirmed our constitutional right to free speech, testimony during debate brought forth a number of examples of school systems and other public workplaces where policies actually had been adopted requiring that certain holidays not be made reference to. It passed by 136 to 25.

On Wednesday, we passed HB 941, the bill to allow posting of the Mayflower Compact, the Ten Commandments and the Declaration of Independence in courthouses. There was some very heated debate, both for and against the bill, but it also passed by a notable margin – 140 to 26.

Friday, we considered HB 1059, the convicted sexual offenders bill. We spent several hours debating it. The opposition mainly centered on two concerns: first, that the bill would limit judicial flexibility in sentencing; and second, that it could potentially trap first offender juveniles in very long sentences, even though the bill had provisions to avoid such situations. I read this long (38 pages) bill closely, and did not agree that it posed a great risk of such pitfalls. Again, we saw some hot partisan debate, but the results were lopsided – 144 to 27.

Other significant bills we passed included HB 101, which, while it is a retirement bill, is not a simple update like the others we’ve passed so far. This bill deals with the fact that, prior to 1976, black police officers and deputies had not been allowed to join the Peace Officer’s Annuity Fund, because of their race. HB 101 addresses that injustice. While this bill will require \$1.5 million per year for the next 30 years to fund, it is simply the right thing to do. It passed unanimously.

On Thursday, we passed HB 1080, the Governor’s proposed income tax credit for certain child and dependent care expenses. It would be phased in over three years, and would work much like the federal credit for the same purpose. It also passed unanimously.

Finally, on Friday, we passed the supplemental budget, HB 1026. For those who haven’t heard of this before, the supplemental budget is a mid year (the state’s fiscal calendar is July 1st through June 30th) adjustment, based on revenue receipts different than those anticipated. This year was a simple exercise, since receipts have been greater than estimated last year. The extra revenue was used to restore many cuts that had been made during the recession. There was very little debate, and the budget passed by 159 to 1.

A non legislative item of note was the Governor’s announcement that the State Health Benefit Plan will now offer a way for folks who quit smoking to have the smoking surcharge removed from their enrollment. It requires not using tobacco for a year, and completing a wellness plan. Information on this opportunity is available online at www.dch.georgia.gov.

On Wednesday, Malin Dartnell, who goes to Morgan County High, came to page for the House. She did a great job, and had a chance to try out the Speaker’s gavel at the end of the day’s session (she gave it a very good, solid whack, too!). Thanks for your service, Malin.

For reference: bills and live session and committee video are online at www.legis.state.ga.us. Contact Info: My office phone is 404-656-0152, and email address is Doug@DougHolt.org.