

A View from the House

By Representative Doug Holt

Last week, though the House was in recess on Monday and Friday for continued work on the 2006/2007 budget, the three days we were in session saw a flurry of action, with 26 bills and resolutions being considered.

Most of the items were fairly mundane, though necessary, changes to state and local government procedures and regulations. Also, a city of Johns Creek, in north Fulton County, was chartered.

I'll focus on the nuts and bolts of the interesting ones, as usual. HB 376 would grant jury duty exemptions to stay at home moms (or dads) of children age 6 or younger. It also extends the exemption to a parent who is home schooling their family's children. It passed unanimously.

HB 833 would give local governments the option of listing procurement or public works bid opportunities (of over \$40,000 and \$100,000, respectively) on the Georgia State Procurement Registry, at no fee. This would expand the reach of advertisement for such opportunities, because the Procurement Registry is online. The intent is obviously to expose opportunities to greater competition, thus creating the chance for local governments to save tax dollars via lower bids that may be received. This bill also passed unanimously.

HB 1190 would strengthen the State Road and Tollway Authority's ability to pursue people who evade tolls – on Georgia 400 currently, and any other tollways created in the future. This bill is a response to the fact that there have been some very consistent violators of the Georgia 400 toll, a few of whom have racked up nearly \$10,000 in unpaid tolls and fines. People are able to evade the toll because of the special lanes created for folks who set up an account with the Authority for an electronic pass that they keep in their car, and which is automatically detected and charged when they drive through. The violators are people who haven't obtained a pass, but use the special access lanes anyway. The Authority would be given the power to pursue these consistent violators through the Office of State Administrative Hearings, where a fine of \$70 per violation (the standard fine for many other roadway violations) could be levied. Failure to pay the fine could result in suspension of the violator's vehicle registration. Someone whose vehicle has been stolen would be exempt, of course. This one passed nearly unanimously, by 158 to 1. I voted yes.

HB 1097 is a bill I mentioned in an earlier column. On the surface, it looked like a ban on use of billboards for advertising of prurient interest. However, further study of the bill revealed that it was really a sweetheart deal for billboard owners. It had a provision that said that if a billboard owner would lower a sign to 70 foot high or less, that they would be given a free permit for another sign, and be allowed to clear-cut 250 feet of trees on either side of the sign along the public right of way. Those trees belong to the people of Georgia, and have both an aesthetic and monetary value. The proposed benefit to Georgia of lowering the signs was hardly sufficient to justify the extra permit, and especially not the clear cutting of so many trees. The real "kicker" was the fact that the bill had a final provision, which very explicitly stated that if any portion of it were to be thrown out by a court as unconstitutional, the rest would still apply. Many representatives who are attorneys (including my Newton Delegation friend, Robert Mumford) pointed out that the ban on prurient advertising would almost certainly be thrown out, leaving primarily the "give-away" parts of the bill intact. Just as many other representatives, I felt this bill was an inappropriate use of public assets. It took a good deal of debate and amendment to cut the bill down so that it contained only the advertising ban, and some useful provisions putting limits on how distracting some of these new, multi message mechanical and electronic signs can be. We then passed it, 145 to 20. Again, I voted yes.

HB 1325 provides for some limited incentives and an expedited process to attract a bid to build a second liquid natural gas (LNG) pipeline from Elba Island (near Savannah), up to the metro

Atlanta area. Currently, most of our LNG comes from four pipeline systems from the Gulf of Mexico, with a small amount coming from the Elba pipeline (much of that pipeline's product goes up the East Coast). Last year's hurricane Katrina, and the resulting LNG and gas disruptions, showed it is in consumer's best interests to have another major source; one not subject to catastrophes in the Gulf. Since no contractor has been willing to bid on building a second line from Elba (one preferably even larger than the current line), it was clear that we needed to create an incentive for some firm(s) to submit bids – hence the bill. Just to be clear, the cost of the pipeline would be passed on to consumers, just as any commercial capital investment is. I consider the value of not being subject to disruptions is clearly worth the extra cost, especially when you consider that LNG from Elba can come from foreign sources that are much cheaper than those in the Gulf (quite likely enough to offset the cost of the pipeline). However, this turned out to be a partisan issue. The Democratic caucus mostly felt that we should wait longer for a bidder to come forward under normal circumstances, and even proposed that we re-regulate Georgia's natural gas industry as a solution. The bill passed by a not quite party-line vote of 110 to 59, with my affirmative.

Finally, HB 1055 calls for school and public libraries to adopt and implement policies to screen out access to offensive web sites on the Internet. The intent is, of course, to protect children from the many, very disgusting sites we all know exist on the net. At first glance, this looked like a very significant imposition on schools and libraries. However, it turns out that 100% of Georgia's schools and libraries are already in compliance with federal laws mandating the same protections. It is necessary to have a state level back up to the federal law, as many other states have done. And the bill specifically exempts schools and libraries already under federal compliance from its provisions. So now, with our current 100% compliance, seems an ideal time to put our own policy in place. This bill saw almost no debate, and passed unanimously.

For reference: bills and live session and committee video are online at www.legis.state.ga.us.
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