

A View from the House

By Representative Doug Holt

Last week we were in session four days including crossover day on Tuesday. We considered 61 bills and resolutions. Since my focus has been to give you a “nuts and bolts” view of legislation, I’m going to use a special opportunity to offer you an even closer look at the process, since I was able to get HB 2 (the annexation bill) passed in the House on Tuesday.

The process started last year, when I introduced an annexation bill, but was never able to get it out of sub-committee. That work was a blessing in disguise, however – because it caught the attention of many people all over Georgia who were also concerned about annexation. Virtually all of them wanted to support my next attempt in 2007.

I introduced HB 2 right away this year. Because the House had a lot of re-organizing to do after last year’s elections, it took almost a month before I was given a first hearing in sub-committee (of a different full committee, this year). Because of all the interest, the audience literally overflowed the meeting room, and, after I presented the bill, we spent two hours hearing testimony from supporters and opponents. What was interesting was that a high percentage of the supporters were ordinary citizens, while almost all of the opponents were municipal officials. The number and fervor of the supporting comments caused a bit of a stir around the Capitol. Those contacts from 2006 had really come through.

Now it was very apparent that my annexation concerns were not just a local issue, and things began to happen. The Georgia Municipal Association (GMA) recognized that this wasn’t something that would “just go away”, and they courteously accepted an offer from Speaker Richardson to sit down with representatives of the Association of County Commissioners of Georgia (ACCG) and negotiate on annexation issues. The first meeting took place in early March, and six hours of discussions produced an initial compromise. For me, this was the real breakthrough, because city/county legislation has almost never passed without mutual agreement by these two groups.

The pace began to quicken as I worked, along with two other representatives the Speaker had asked to get involved, to move the agreement through the committee. We substituted the language of the compromise in place of my original HB 2, since that bill was already in committee. Even so, the next couple of weeks were quite a roller coaster ride, since there was an almost constant flow of revisions from the ongoing negotiations – and there was one committee meeting where we thought the will to compromise had fallen apart, which was a quite an emotional low point. However, cooler heads prevailed, and we moved forward. Then we had a committee meeting on Wednesday, the 21st, when we thought we had a largely finished product, ready to vote out of committee. Just before the chairman was ready to call for a vote to move the bill out of committee, one member offered what seemed like a very innocuous amendment. The committee quickly voted for it. Within a few moments, however, we all realized that the amendment was a very carefully crafted phrase that made the bill inapplicable to most annexations. Hence the news reports that the bill had been “gutted”.

With crossover day looming, we had to act fast. The chairman of the committee called a special meeting for Monday the 26th. We spoke with the members of the committee, and made sure they were willing to remove the amendment, and then vote the bill out. The meeting went as planned: one of the few steps in this process that did so.

The next step was to get the House Rules Committee to put the bill on the list for consideration on the House floor Tuesday. With assurances of support from most of the House leadership, I went to the crossover morning Rules meeting, and hit another “dip” on the roller coaster ride. One member of the leadership, an attorney, had serious reservations about the bill, and objected to it being released to the floor. Another compromise was now necessary. Instead of the bill

being released “structured” (meaning no amendments allowed), which ACCG and GMA wanted; it was released “open”, meaning “anything goes”.

Still, the important thing was that the bill had made it to the House floor for consideration. Around 8:30 that night, I presented it, took a few questions, and then other representatives came to the Well (the presentation podium) to speak about it. There were six who spoke, with two opposing attorney representatives in the middle. Their presentations were powerful, and I conferred with other supporters, who felt that defeat might be very possible. Then I went to talk with the Speaker, who advised me to ride it out.

The final two speakers were in support. They were both very good, especially the Chairman of Rules, Representative Earl Ehrhart. He is one of the best speakers I’ve seen in action, and as the last member to comment on HB 2, his remarks were very potent. One amendment was offered, but defeated. Then debate was over, and it was time to hold my breath and vote for my own bill. The voting results board in the House displays each vote immediately as cast, and an initial scattering of green “Y’s” was followed by a rush of them. The final tally: 156 to 14. In all honesty, I found myself in a bit of a daze for a while after the vote, saying “thanks” and shaking hands with many peers who came to congratulate me.

The next day was back to earth, and time to write thank you notes to 155 supporting representatives. Now I just need to go convince a few senators...

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