

A View from the House

By Representative Doug Holt

Since I related that in depth look at passing a bill in my last column, I'll try to catch up with interesting bills passed in the House in the meantime.

HB 131 intends to extend Georgia's HERO scholarships (Helping Educate Reservists and their Offspring) to surviving spouses of Georgia National Guard or Reserve members who have been killed in a combat zone. This plugs an oversight in the original legislation that leaves out a mere dozen or so folks each year – people who really deserve our gratitude for their sacrifice. The bill passed by 165 to 0.

HB 152 would make the process of obtaining the HOPE scholarship an even playing field for students who have come from a home school environment, or gone to unaccredited high schools. Currently, such students must pay for their first year of college, and they are reimbursed at the end of their freshman year if they held a 3.0 GPA or better. HB 152 would allow such students to receive the HOPE going in to college if they scored in the 85th or higher percentile on a standardized college admission test like the ACT or the SAT. This seemed only fair to most of us, passing by 164 to 1 (it wasn't me).

HB 169 offers a two-year sales tax exemption for charitable donations of prepared food and beverages. The donations would have to be made to nonprofit agencies that distribute the donations for hunger or disaster relief. There was no dissent in passing this bill.

HB 197 would repeal a law that gives three-judge panels the power to review sentences of 12 or more years. The constitutionality of these panels has been questioned by the state Supreme Court. Also, some of these panels have overturned sentences that were the result of plea-bargaining. This bill did spark some sharp debate, but passed by 102 to 62, with my "yes".

HB 222 would prohibit county tax commissioners and their employees from purchasing property sold at public auction because of tax delinquency. The bill provides for punishment by imprisonment or a fine. This activity is equivalent to "insider trading". I voted for it, as did almost everyone else. The bill passed by 164 to 3.

HB 242 would grant certain insurance premium tax exemptions for high deductible health plans. There are people in Georgia willing to purchase such health insurance, but their numbers are not great enough to attract many providers of such plans. HB 242 simply seeks to make this market more attractive, so that more companies would offer these plans. There was some debate, centered on the contention that "high deductible insurance is no insurance at all." Still, a solid majority (myself included) felt that a more competitive market for such insurance is valuable. The bill passed by 117 to 44.

HB 332 would give school systems a two-year extension of the deadline for bringing their maximum class sizes in line with state requirements. It is simply an accommodation of reality, especially for fast growing systems. Even so, there was some dissent, with the bill passing by 104 to 64 (I voted yes).

HB 551 would enable the state and private citizens to bring civil action suits against people and organizations that have obtained state funds through false Medicaid claims. Considering that Medicaid is the fastest growing part of the state budget, and is beginning to crowd out other vital programs, HB 551 seemed like a "no brainer" to just about everyone, including me. The bill passed by 164 to 2.

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