

A View from the House

By Representative Doug Holt

We were not in session this week, in order to let the Appropriations Committee hold hearings on the Governor's Budget Recommendation, and begin their work on the budget. While the week was otherwise spent in the usual fashion in building support for bills, we did have a very interesting seminar on a topic that has attracted growing interest in Georgia. The seminar was a presentation including all points of view about Certificates of Need (CON). A CON is basically a license that must be obtained from the Georgia Department of Community Health that permits creation, change or acquisition of a new medical facility or major piece of medical equipment. The intent behind CON was to avoid an over-supply of a given medical service within an area, thus driving up costs. This program was initiated in 1979, as a federal mandate. The mandate has since been removed, and fourteen other states have eliminated their CON process. We are faced with a debate about whether our CON system is still serving a valuable purpose in Georgia, or has become obsolete in the almost completely revised world of medical insurance and payment systems. There was a great deal of information and opinion given out, and most legislators will continue to study this issue.

The bottom line is really that medical costs have been rising at 2 to 2 ½ times the rate of inflation for over 30 years. This rapid increase is based mainly on three trends we cannot change: 1) The continuous introduction of new medical technology, the cost of which grows exponentially; 2) America's ever decreasing ability to pay for medical care, a painful consequence of our on-going loss of good manufacturing jobs; and, 3) the unanticipated growth of our really "senior" senior population (85 and over) – folks who need far more care per person than younger people. What we're really seeing is a quest to handle this increasingly "hot potato" by finding more efficient means of delivering and administering medical services. CON may or may not contribute to this goal, but we will still have to deal with that rapid growth of medical costs, no matter what. It is one of the great challenges facing our generation.

Now, on to a few interesting bills. HB 9 would require our new electronic voting machines to produce a paper record for each voter of the votes they have cast. You would be able to review the record, and then place it in a ballot box. I know many folks would like to see this added to the new machines. However, having served on a board of elections during the introduction of electronic voting, I can tell you that the existence of a paper record may produce unexpected consequences. First, a recount could take days, weeks or months (depending on the office sought). Second, there is the possibility that a legal challenge could conclude that the paper record is more valid than the electronic one – forcing all elections to be based on the paper ballot. Finally, counting paper ballots inevitably introduces the possibility of human error, so multiple counts might be necessary in really close races. Comforting as a paper record might be, I suspect we ought to tread very carefully here.

HB 38 would allow you to put a permanent freeze on your credit report, and includes procedures for allowing a temporary lifting of that freeze for a period of time, or for an organization you designate.

HB 43 would require that anyone registering to vote must be a U.S. citizen, and would have to present a birth certificate, passport, or proof of naturalization. A handful of minor exceptions required by federal law are included in the bill.

Of interest: the ethics complaint filed against Speaker Glenn Richardson was officially dismissed. The Speaker, who certainly knows the ropes, hasn't even wasted much time worrying about this one. It's just the usual "below the belt" kind of stuff that elected officials often have to put up with.

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