

A View from the House

By Representative Doug Holt

Last week, the Appropriations Committee completed hearings with the Governor's staff about his budget recommendation. We were back in session this week, organizing committees and getting bills flowing. In the background, the Appropriations folks are beginning the much more "meaty" and lengthy task of preparing first the Supplemental Budget (a mid year adjustment that decides how our current revenue surplus is used); and then the main Budget, for fiscal year 2008. Having learned the process, I have to hand it to Appropriations members: they are involved with other committees and legislation, just as the rest of us are. But they are also performing an exhaustive review of the performance of the various departments, agencies and other arms of government named in the Governor's recommendation. They make sure that funds budgeted last year have been well used. They also take feedback from other House members about whether changes should be made to the recommendation. This is how your legislators have input into the budget. Constitutionally, the House is the true drafter of the budget – remember, the Governor submits only a "recommendation".

While I continue working on annexation reform, it looks like the stir caused by my bill last year has generated some interest. I now have several peers submitting bills to reform other annexation provisions. The most interesting is HB 109, which, if passed, would turn all counties in the state with no cities or towns into "consolidated governments". In other words, they would be like Athens/Clarke County. Such governments would be counties, but would also have many rights, powers and responsibilities of cities. And they would be immune to annexation. This is a very interesting proposal. It could avoid future possible "tugs of war" between counties and cities in many parts of the state.

HB 69 is a citizen friendly piece of legislation. Though not pleasant to know, all states sell abstracts (summaries without details) of our driving records. Insurance companies use the data to evaluate each of us when setting the price of our auto insurance. Getting a copy of your own record has always been difficult. HB 69 would change that by requiring that the state make our driving records available to us online for free. Once again, the internet may provide another way to make government more efficient, and "customer oriented."

HB 141 would exempt student purchases of textbooks from sales taxes. I have had folks ask me about this, and I think it is very appropriate (I suspect many of you who don't have kids in a college or tech school are surprised to learn this exemption doesn't exist). I researched it, considering it something I might pursue after dealing with annexation. I learned, much to my surprise, that there have been at least two attempts to make this change in the past 15 years – and both failed because of heavy special interest lobbying. So I'm very impressed that Rep. Bill Hembree has the moxie to give this a shot.

HB 78 would add another category for which the "conservation easement" could be used. For those who aren't familiar with it, the easement is a property tax break meant to help farmers stay on their land, rather than selling out for development. The new category is "agritourism", which is defined as charging admission for people to view and/or participate in operation of a farm for entertainment or educational purposes. Maybe it sounds a little flaky, but I know of instances where this extra income would keep a farmer from being driven from his land.

Tuesday, I enjoyed visiting with the DeKalb Tech Student Government leaders. They impressed me with their intelligent questions and interest. Perhaps a couple of future legislators there!

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