

A View from the House

By Representative Doug Holt

Last week we considered 11 bills and resolutions. We're also still waiting on an answer to the Peachcare funding issue. That question is making it difficult to set budget priorities, since the requirement of funding what would normally come from the federal government involves a very large amount of money – so large that it could derail many state programs from their customary course.

Of the bills and resolutions we voted on, three were of some interest. HB 89 would allow a person transporting a loaded weapon in a vehicle to store it wherever they want. Current law requires it be fully exposed to view, or in a legally specified compartment. I spoke with law enforcement officials in the district, and the vast majority felt that this change would make no difference in how officers would handle a pullover. There are two main reasons why they felt so. First is the fact that people with criminal intent don't obey the current law anyway. The second is that the current law is vague, and that its enforcement, as well as its judicial interpretation, is not consistent around the state. There are some parts of Georgia where people with a weapon partly obscured by something that has slid over it are being charged as if they were hiding it. In other words, the main impact of the current code is that law-abiding folks are being punished for unintended "gotcha" situations.

This bill sparked some good debate, mainly centered on children in a vehicle. The consensus was that hiding a weapon makes little difference if a child is left alone, with time to indulge their curiosity. In other words, parental responsibility regarding a weapon is really the issue, and the current law hasn't kept parents from carelessly causing accidents – so why would this change make any difference? After about two hours of discussion, the law passed by a solid 130 to 38, with my "yes".

HB 91 will require that state agencies submit reports about their finances to the House and Senate Appropriations committees, and to the House Budget and Fiscal Affairs Oversight Committee. These reports will need to contain detailed listings of revenues and expenditures, a list of general contracts of \$50,000 or more, employment/consultant contracts of \$20,000 or greater, as well as some other details. This bill was introduced because a legislative requirement that forced MARTA to submit such reports unveiled duplicate contracts and other discrepancies. MARTA now has a surplus in its budget for the first time in quite a while. This surprise made it clear that we should require the same accountability from other state agencies. The agencies always lobby the legislature hard for more funding, so I think the public deserves just as much effort on their part to demonstrate that they have been good stewards of the funds entrusted to them. This bill passed unanimously.

HB 24 is a revision of the code sections that deal with living wills and associated power of attorney. The two code sections currently have some conflicting provisions, and you pretty much need an attorney to help you draft documents to record your intentions for situations where you are incapacitated, and can't make healthcare decisions for yourself. The best part about this comprehensive revision is that you will now be able to draft your own "Advance Directive for Health Care" document. You'll be able to create it by filling in a form, written in layman's terms, and you won't need an attorney to be certain it's valid and effective. Current living wills and power of attorney documents will remain valid, though. This bill also passed unanimously.

On Monday, Courtney Jackson, who is in tenth grade at Eastside High, came to serve as a page. She did a great job, and had the chance to listen in to the debate on HB 89, giving her a terrific chance to see democracy at work.

On Tuesday, Patsy Harris, Miriam Baker and Jeff Tomlinson of the Morgan County Library came to visit, and I really enjoyed the chance to chat with them.

Danny Stone brought this year's Chamber of Commerce Leadership Newton class to the Capitol on Thursday. Representative Mumford and I enjoyed talking with the group and answering some very good questions. I'd like to thank everyone who came for braving the traffic and cold to come visit with us, and have a photo made with Governor Perdue.

On a sad note, I'm sure you've all heard that Congressman Charlie Norwood passed away this week. We cancelled all committee meetings on Thursday, and only went into session long enough to pass a resolution honoring him. That way we had the time to get to Augusta for his funeral.

Inevitably, there is already speculation about how his office will be filled. Unlike with U.S. Senators, whose unfilled term can be assigned by choice of the Governor, U.S. House members must be replaced by special election. I don't know about intentions in the Georgia Senate, but in the House, the odds on favorite is District 117 Representative Barry Fleming, of Harlem. He has served for the past three years as Majority Whip, and has done a very good job in this role. I'm sure many other candidates will appear, however.

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