

A View from the House

By Representative Doug Holt

We were only in session three days last week. We did this in an effort to stretch out our legislative time, in hopes that some kind of settlement of the PeachCare issue with the federal government can be reached. We had both U.S. senators, and several congressmen, stop in to speak to us about how they are working to get the situation resolved in Washington D.C. Still, there is no clear indication of just how soon a financial “fix” will come. We have also had some debate around the Capitol about changing PeachCare into a Medicaid type system, which would allow it to tap into available funds, and solve the money part of the crisis. However, this would not be a “hand in glove” kind of alteration, and some children would cease being eligible, so I’m not sure that this would be a really good solution, either. We would be dealing with two very complex, and very different, healthcare programs in this second approach. I’m not even sure that we could legislate this other solution quickly enough to resolve the issue. So the wait goes on...

We considered 16 bills and resolutions during the week. Almost all were fairly “lightweight” issues, with near, or completely unanimous votes (I voted yes on all of those). Two were worthy of some discussion. HB 155 sets up a system that will require criminal background checks for people who own or seek to acquire ten percent or more of a personal care facility (facilities for the elderly, or for children). Criminal checks are already required for employees of such businesses. The authors of HB 155 were concerned about owners who show a history of abusing children or the elderly. Ownership of one of these facilities could give people with criminal habits easy access to potential victims. There was some debate over the bill, because it was lengthy enough to raise some questions about wording: nonetheless, we had little real dissent over the validity of its objective. The bill passed by 161 to 8, with my “yes”.

HB 318 was introduced at the request of the administrators of the state retirement systems for teachers and other state employees. Their primary desire was to be allowed to invest more of their assets (changing from 10 to 20%) in non-U.S. or Canadian companies – but only those firms valued at \$100 million or more. During debate, the bill was amended to reduce the percentage to 15%, and to require that no funds could be invested in countries that have been identified as terrorist sponsors (I voted yes on both amendments, in case the bill passed). The bill was then defeated in a vote of 87 to 81 (the state constitution requires 91 votes for passage), with my “no” vote. However, we later learned that part of the reason for this request is that many companies we consider to be American or Canadian have moved their headquarters offshore to avoid corporate income taxes. We were also asked to consider that many foreign corporations have built major facilities in this country, creating a lot of jobs. So the 10% restriction has been a significant restraint on the number of large companies the retirement funds have to choose from. We also found out that the 10% that has been invested “offshore” has performed better than the other 90% during the last decade. So we then voted (with my “yes”) to reconsider the bill, in light of this other information. I’ll keep you posted.

On Tuesday, Sheriff Markley brought the Chamber of Commerce Government Affairs committee to the Capitol. We had a chance to sit down and discuss both state and local issues, and then have a photo made with the Governor. As always, I appreciate visitors from home; it’s good to relax with folks I know, and a nice break from the intense pace of work at the Capitol.

On Thursday, Harriett Jordan, whom I know from the Brick Store Club, dropped by. We were in session, so I was only able to chat for a few minutes, but I was glad to get to say hello. Later that day, Commission Chairman Varner, District Attorney Ken Wynne, and judges Johnson, Ott, Ozburn and Sorrells came to the Capitol. They joined Senator Douglas and myself in supporting Representative Robbie Mumford when he presented a bill to split the Alcovy Judicial Circuit. Since both Newton and Walton counties (the two counties in the circuit) are growing so quickly, it’s time to separate them into independent court circuits. This was the second year that Representative Mumford had introduced legislation to have this change made. He and the

judges made a great presentation to the Civil Judiciary Committee, and the bill was given a “thumbs up”. Hopefully, we will have a chance to move it forward in a House floor vote within the next week or so.

There has been more action leading up to the special election (to be held June 19th) to succeed Charlie Norwood in the 10th Congressional District. Representative Barry Fleming, whom I mentioned last week, has stepped out of the race. Meanwhile, I have learned that two state senators – Ralph Hudgens, of Comer; and Jim Whitehead, of Evans, are currently in the running. I’ll keep you posted as I learn more.

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