

A View from the House

By Representative Doug Holt

Last week, the House was in session two days, so the Senate could digest the 2009 budget. We considered 15 items.

The most important, by far, was the latest version of the transportation sales tax. Heavily revised, SR 845 offers a referendum in November to empower 12 regions to hold 1% transportation sales tax referendums. This revised proposal is not much of an improvement over the statewide version. It fails an acid test. While building expectations of dramatically reducing (especially metro) traffic congestion, it contains no actual plan to accomplish that goal; no specific, verifiable steps designed to produce measurable congestion relief. The 12 regions will simply devise lists of desired projects to fund with the sales tax, without any requirements that those projects produce results.

Meanwhile, the legislature is urging DOT to create a strategic transportation plan for Georgia, but there's no way the plan can be completed in less than a year. Thus SR 845 could not be tied to such a document to provide the necessary detailed plan. In fact, if the tax proposal goes forward, we will find it difficult, if not impossible to tie the regions to the plan. So what alternative is left to the governing boards of the regions? Probably that old standby known as "horse-trading". If anyone can explain to me how horse-trading will produce congestion relief plans, please call!

Lack of a real plan was merely the most powerful reason to oppose SR 845. There are others. House rules require that revenue bills be accompanied by what is called a "Fiscal Note". The note contains an independent analysis of the impact of the legislation. However, resolutions for a constitutional amendment are not covered by the rule. So the only figures available to review were numbers cobbled together by "Get Georgia Moving", which is the organization that has been playing cheerleader for this new tax all along (are your "potential conflict of interest" warning lights going off?). Consider: we don't have a plan that specifies what it will take to fix congestion, much less what the fix will cost. Thus we can't know if this tax will raise too little revenue, or maybe way too much.

Next, ponder the lack of commitment to raise the priority of transportation and find some of the desired funding out of existing revenues. You may remember that the House passed legislation just a couple of weeks ago that would have eliminated the vehicle ad valorem tax. Though it looks like the Senate doesn't agree with this proposal, I must point to very confident assertions by House leadership that we could "find" the \$670 million plus per year required for the tax cut. If we could do that, why can't we "find" half of the \$1.5 billion per year expected from the transportation sales tax, rather than go straight to the voters for all of it?

Finally, remember 1996, when the goal of congestion free Olympic games spawned traffic containment rules – and they worked? Why are we not studying those comparatively low cost measures?

With all these concerns, I simply couldn't vote yes. The resolution passed, however, by 136 to 35. So if this measure completes its trek into law, I have some warnings. When our region publishes a project list, look at it very closely, and decide whether we are getting a fair deal. If you don't think so, let your county commissioner know. The commission will hopefully have the option of backing out of the regional plan.

Also, remember that Morgan has less than 10% of the region's population, so voters in larger counties will dominate a regional referendum.

In Newton, those living in the western side of the county, who do much of their shopping in Rockdale, might want to change their habits. Rockdale is in a different region, and your sales taxes will fund metro Atlanta's transportation projects.

For reference: bills and live session and committee video are online at www.legis.state.ga.us. Contact Info: My office phone is 404-656-0152, and email address is Doug@DougHolt.org.