

A View from the House

By Representative Doug Holt

The final week of the 2008 session saw the usual legislative flood. We considered about 95 items. Despite the quantity of bills and resolutions reviewed, the will of the House to scrutinize each one remained strong. Several bills sparked debate, or saw multiple attempts to amend. At one point, during consideration of an insurance bill, Speaker Richardson made a tongue in cheek comment along the lines of "If every member of this body who is an insurance agent intends ask a question, we won't get to much else today". I'll describe a couple of the more interesting measures that won't get coverage in major media, and then give a wrap-up for the session. Please keep in mind that passage of a bill I list here does not mean final passage. Most of the measures I'll discuss had to go back to the Senate, and as of this time, I don't have word about how they fared in that body.

SB 24 is meant to address some of the increasingly dangerous "spam" showing up in your email box. I'm referring to messages claiming to be from some legitimate organization, but are really from on-line con artists who are trying to get you to divulge personal information. This practice is called "phishing", and seeks to obtain social security numbers, credit card numbers, passwords, or anything else that would let criminals access your financial accounts or make purchases using your credit. The bill provides significant criminal penalties in the form of fines or prison time. While many of the people seeking to defraud you this way are from out of state, or even out of country, SB 24 creates the framework for Georgia law enforcement to work with out of state authorities to crack down on phishing. The bill passed unanimously.

SB 33 will authorize the Georgia Emergency Management Agency (GEMA) to create a building mapping information system. This system will include maps of government buildings to aid first responders in case of a disaster, or a criminal/terrorist act. On the face of it, this measure seems like a great idea. I would certainly like to assist police, fire, EMS folks and others in doing their jobs. But this concept has a dangerous downside. These building maps would be stored online. While I'm sure great effort will be made to keep this information secure, I seriously doubt that it is possible to truly keep it safe. If hackers break into national Department of Defense networks with regularity, I'm sure they will eventually get at the building map database. This means that such information would eventually end up in the very hands of those it is meant to protect against – namely terrorists. We certainly don't need to assist such enemies, so I voted "no". Other representatives either didn't see the potential dangers of this bill, or didn't think they were a significant concern, and it passed by 149 to 17.

SB 130, by Senator Johnny Grant, streamlines certain functions of the Georgia Building Authority. It also directs the Authority to set higher standards for energy efficiency and water conservation in new and remodeled facilities, based on a return on investment standard of 10 years. This is sensible way to use tax dollars more wisely, and passed with no dissent.

SB 300, called the "Transparency in Government Act", will require that the state budget, and annual financial reports by all state departments, agencies and authorities will be made available in a searchable format online by January 1st, 2010. These reports will also include evaluations by the state auditor of each entity. This is a terrific way to leverage the power of the internet so that all Georgians can see how their tax dollars are being spent. This certainly falls in the "no brainer" category, and passed unanimously.

SB 433, is a compromise revision of Georgia's Certificate of Need (CON) law. A CON is a permit required from the state to build a new medical facility. SB 433 seeks to streamline some facets of CON that stifle competition, while at the same time imposing indigent care obligations on new facilities. The bill fits the time honored definition of a compromise, in that the parties contending over CON law each like some parts of the bill, while not being too pleased with other parts. The bill passed, with my "yes", by 138 to 17.

SB 342 seeks to provide state support for building reservoirs. It is similar to HB 1226, which the House passed on March 4th, but was never taken up in the Senate. This bill is different in two important, and detrimental ways. First, it doesn't contain prohibitions against transfer of water between river basins, which is an essential protection against metro Atlanta's bottomless thirst.

Second, the bill contains a provision that would set a state policy of transitioning homes that are on wells and septic systems to water and sewer systems. This policy would be a direct threat to the semi-rural lifestyle that many folks in this district have chosen, living on two to five acre parcels away from the cities and towns. It would emphasize higher density development, something many of the people I serve have told me they moved here to avoid. With these concerns in mind, I voted "no", but the bill passed by 111 to 59.

You have probably heard that both the Speaker's tax cut and the transportation sales tax did not reach final passage. The Senate did not agree on the form the tax relief should take, and the sales tax failed in the Senate. Both will probably be addressed again next year.

Morgan Board of Education member Dave Belton stopped by on Tuesday, in uniform because he had a break between piloting Delta flights. He was at the Capitol keeping tabs on several education initiatives, and I enjoyed the chance to discuss those with him.

On Wednesday, Ray and Susan DesJardins, from River Cove, came by the Capitol to watch final week legislative action in both House and Senate. We discussed the status of Social Circle's actions in northeast Newton. Friday, Jonnell Minefee of Oxford was advocating for "Dads on Duty", a group that works to prevent neighborhood violence. I was curious to learn about their mission, and Jonnell had lots of good questions about how the legislative process works. Thanks to all of you for taking the time to come to Atlanta, and brave closing week Capitol crowds!

Now I'll outline a quick session wrap-up. Since January 14th, I read over 460 bills, resolutions, etc., and voted on about 300. I received 7271 contacts (phone calls, visits, mail and email), of which almost 12% were from within the district (I continue to make responding to all in-district contacts my first priority). Email made up about 79% of my in-district contacts, and 90% of all contacts. "Spam" email accounted for 91% of the out-of-district contacts.

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