

A View from the House

By Representative Doug Holt

The committee system began putting legislation on the House floor last week, and we considered 10 items. Seven were “housekeeping” measures (re-authorizing existing programs, or keeping state law in line with federal statutes). Three were somewhat more interesting, though not contentious, since all passed unanimously.

HB 46 and HB 121 ratify executive orders by Governor Perdue last year that held certain fuel sales taxes steady. The Governor issued those orders while fuel prices were in the stratosphere, in order to spare consumers extra pain, and to keep the state from taking in a windfall. Some say it would be nice to have those revenues now, but this is a moot point. It is physically impossible to track down everyone who bought gas during those months in order to force them to pay.

HB 157 would change some of the language on how lottery allocations to the HOPE scholarship program work. Under current rules, if lottery reserves are even a dollar less at the end of one year compared to the previous, certain elements of the HOPE get cut or eliminated (like book allowances, for example). The new language would set percentage triggers in place, which is a much more analytical approach.

Now to examine more interesting new bills. HB 44 would require that all state agencies and departments go through a process called zero-based budgeting at least once every four years. They would need to justify their entire spending plan from the ground up, program by program, instead of simply asking for a continuance of their existing budget allocation. This bill was almost passed last year, but got caught up in the usual frenzy at the end of the session.

HB 55 deals with a problem in which real and personal property records that are maintained online sometimes contain social security numbers. The bill would require superior court clerks to redact (obscure or otherwise make unreadable) numbers that appear on such documents. Government certainly doesn't need to be helping identity thieves.

HB 90 is perhaps a sad comment on our times. The bill would authorize committee chairs in the Georgia House and Senate to administer an oath to individuals testifying at a committee hearing, affirming that he or she is being truthful. Violation of the oath would carry a stiff fine, or even jail time. It is disappointing that anyone feels that such strong action is necessary.

HB 96 proposes a “Georgia Free Enterprise and Antitrust Act”, to be administered by the state Attorney General. In short, it provides a framework for prosecuting anti-competitive commerce within Georgia. This may be intended to cover some gap in applicability of federal statutes. It will be interesting to hear the author's rationale for the bill.

HB 122 would require that all cities and counties with a budget in excess of \$1 million maintain a web-based, searchable record of financial data, to include revenues, budget, contracts, travel expenses, as well as other information. This should be a good complement to the website that provides the same kinds of information about the state (www.open.georgia.gov).

HB 126, entitled the Uniform Electronic Transactions Act, is focused on providing standards for the conduct of commerce over the internet in Georgia. The authors are responding to the fact that many aspects of buying and selling on the web work differently than older forms of doing business, and thus require guidelines for proper interpretation and enforcement of contracts.

On Wednesday, the Ingalsbe family from Rutledge (David, Debbie, Nate and Nicole) were at the Capitol, and we had a chance to go out on the House floor after the session was over. Then Board of Education member Dave Belton came by on Thursday to discuss a couple of bills. Thanks to all of you for taking the time to visit.

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