

A View from the House

By Representative Doug Holt

The General Assembly began to slow down its proceedings last week, to give us time to respond to federal initiatives you've probably read about. Some of those initiatives may be helpful, but others may have too many strings attached – we'll need to review them. For now, we plan on three days of session each week. Meanwhile, the House voted on 9 bills and resolutions. Several are interesting.

HB 194 would require that pharmacists filling generic drug prescriptions also list the brand name of the drug on the bottle. Some pharmacies already do this, and the practice is helpful enough that all should follow suit. The bill passed unanimously.

HB 71 closes an exemption allowing legal manufacture of simulated ID documents that carry the word "Novelty". It's probably not a surprise to learn that the exemption has been used for a variety of criminal ends. A few members of the House tried to fight the bill, but passage was a pretty lopsided 161 to 13 (with my support).

HB 233 seeks to place a two year freeze on property tax assessments, and is intended as temporary relief during the ongoing recession (a depression now?). I voted for the bill, and it passed by 110 to 63.

HR 1 did not pass, but since it has generated so much interest, I feel it should be discussed. The measure called for a constitutional referendum to place caps on the rate at which property tax assessments are allowed to increase. The limit would be an average of 3% per year. We had several hours of debate on the resolution, with many good points made by supporters and opponents. For me, the question boiled down to two primary issues. The first is the proposition that, if property taxes are good for local governments because they are a predictable source of revenue, then their impact on property owners should also be predictable. The second issue is the idea that assessments that have grown faster than inflation create a tax upon an unrealized (sometimes never realized) gain – or from another perspective, these situations can force a property owner to pay a tax that is unreflective of his or her original investment. So I voted yes, but the measure failed to get the necessary 2/3rds (120 vote) majority required. The total was 105 to 67.

Now a few new bills. HB 127 intends to set standards for electronic recording of property records. Many superior court clerks are beginning to provide access to such records online, and the authors feel there is a need for standards and protections to oversee the transition.

HB 146 has been offered by a former deputy sheriff, and targets drivers who refuse to provide a four-foot safety margin when passing bicyclists or pedestrians. Such offenders would be charged with the offense of aggressive driving.

HB 149 intends to create a "Move on When Ready" program, in which eleventh and twelfth grade students can take postsecondary classes for high school credit. This appears to be another effort to streamline the transition between high school and college; most such bills are aimed at achieving efficiencies for both students and school systems.

HB 213 seeks to reduce street gang activity near schools. The bill would increase the mandatory minimum prison sentence for those convicted of gang activity within a school safety zone by two years.

I had quite a few visitors this week. Richard Jolley, Keith Mitcham and Thomas Bell were at the Capitol with the Farm Bureau on Tuesday, and had a number of agriculture issues to discuss. Lindsay Tyner with the Alcovy CASA was also here that day. On Wednesday, Stanley Long was here to cover some concerns with a couple of bills. Dr. Joe Hutcheson, principle of Morgan Middle School, brought a group of students, teachers and parents, along with Superintendent Dr. DeJarnett and Board of Education member Dave Belton, on Wednesday. Representative Bob Smith and I enjoyed the chance to have the House congratulate Morgan Middle on being named a Lighthouse School to Watch. On Thursday, Danny Stone brought this year's Leadership Newton class for state government day. They had a chance to watch some spirited debate on the House floor.

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