

## A View from the House

By Representative Doug Holt

More significant budget news arrived last week. No sooner had we started work on the fiscal 2010 budget, than Governor Perdue was forced to reduce the revenue estimate by another \$1.6 billion. However, that will be softened by receipt of perhaps \$1.1 billion in federal stimulus money. Even so, that's at least several percent more the legislature will have to slice out of existing spending programs, in order to make our books balance. Any doubt of this being the worst downturn in Georgia since the Great Depression has been erased. I've spoken with folks who were in the House 20 and 30 years ago, and they made it clear that past recessions were far easier affairs, in which the problem was simply not getting as much of a revenue increase as expected. Hopefully we won't have to examine some of the most drastic ideas for cutting back, like shortening the school year (which would save \$45 million per day). In any case, while fiscal 2010 will be a very lean time, there seems to be a consensus among economic forecasters that we will see the bottom at some point during the year. After this cutting process, we will certainly have a clear eye on our priorities as Georgia moves into the recovery.

The General Assembly is moving towards legislative day number 30, which is called "crossover day". This is the last day that bills passed in one chamber of the legislature can still go on to the other. We usually see a great volume of bills and resolutions as we close in on this mark. This week was no exception as we worked our way through 43 bills and resolutions.

HB 45 would require that proof of United States citizenship be necessary in order to register to vote (existing voters would be grandfathered in). An individual registering could offer a driver's license, birth certificate copy, a U.S. passport or one of several other types of documents as proof of citizenship. This measure generated several hours of debate, with accusations being hurled alleging that members were "unpatriotic" and that the bill would amount to a "Gestapo type" control on voting. Regardless of such charges, the bill passed by a largely party line 102 to 63, with my support.

HB 127 is another of the "interesting new bills" I reviewed earlier in the session that made it to the House floor. The bill authorizes the superior court clerk's to develop standards for electronic recording of property records that are compatible with those of the federal government and other states. I voted "yes", and the bill passed by 154 to 1.

HB 171 would add email addresses to the list of personal information items that local governments cannot disclose when they have collected them in relation to neighborhood watches or in tracking private alarm systems. This seems a sensible precaution, and it passed unanimously.

HB 302 is meant to combat a problem in which third party firms have been billing people for services they have not specifically authorized, via add on line items to phone bills (present law allows the third party firms to simply claim that a consumer has signed up). This is a deceptive practice that must be stopped. The bill requires phone companies to allow any customer to place a block on services and charges by third parties. The bill passed with no opposition.

HB 312 seeks to bring Georgia mortgage law into compliance with recent federal legislation that sets higher standards for licensing of mortgage loan originators. Considering financial news of the last two years, this seemed a very sensible effort on the part of the state. The bill passed unanimously.

HB 206 offers a referendum (on the November 2010 ballot) to enact a 10 year 1% transportation sales tax. The proceeds of this tax would be dedicated to congestion relief. The funds would be used to construct a specific list of projects, which, while weighted towards metro Atlanta, nonetheless has items involving all forms of ground transportation, all around the state. This puts a

second major transportation funding bill in play, since the Senate has already passed one. I found this proposition much improved over the one offered in the House last year, so I voted in favor, and the resolution passed by 151 to 15. Now the authors of the House and Senate versions will need to hammer out a compromise, if we wish to move forward on this issue.

SB 83, already passed by the Senate, offered a referendum (June of this year) on increasing the statewide homestead exemption from \$2,000 to \$4,000. If passed by voters, the exemption would increase annually in step with cost of living changes (likely based on the Consumer Price Index). The bill saw a fair amount of debate, and could not muster the 2/3rds-majority necessary. It failed (I supported the bill) by 98 to 63. We did pass a motion to reconsider this action, but I'll be surprised if we can pull in the 22 additional votes necessary for passage.

On Tuesday, Covington Mayor Kim Carter and her husband Maurice rode to the Capitol with members of the Covington cyclists club as part of this year's "Georgia Rides to the Capitol" event, which promotes bicycling and seeks support for making Georgia a more bicycle friendly state. Covington City Council members Hawnethia Williams and Ocie Franklin joined them there, and I appreciated the chance to visit with the group.

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