

A View from the House

By Representative Doug Holt

The House passed the fiscal 2010, or “big” budget last week. This measure reflects a significant reduction of expected revenue, and is over 12% less than the original fiscal 2009 budget we adopted last year. In raw numbers, the budget is \$18.5 billion, a decrease of \$2.6 billion. Thus most areas received significant cuts, though we held to the mindset that cuts to education would be less severe. If revenues drop even more, we will have some truly difficult decisions to make.

In other business, the House dropped back to “idle” for the week, as our committee system began reviewing the many bills the Senate sent to us through crossover day. This gives me a chance to report on some important committee work.

In the House Transportation Committee last week, we spent a good deal of time reviewing SB 200, the transportation governance bill. This bill, already passed by the Senate, proposes a major restructuring of how transportation projects should be selected and administered. While it is a lengthy piece of legislation, it does two primary things. First, it would centralize the operations of the State Road and Tollway Authority, the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority (GRTA) and the planning and project functions of DOT into a new State Transportation Agency (STA). The STA would be governed by a board appointed by the Governor, Lieutenant Governor, and the Speaker of the House, and operated by a Secretary of Transportation appointed by the Governor. The second and more important purpose of the bill is to task the STA with creating a truly statewide, comprehensive transportation plan that would prioritize and fund projects based on need and congestion relief. The plan and funding would be subject to regular legislative oversight and appropriations.

There has been a good deal of discussion of SB 200 in the press already, and some weak points of the proposal have been well highlighted. The biggest sore spot is the concern that power over the new STA would be too concentrated in the hands of the Governor, Lieutenant Governor and Speaker. I share this concern with many of my fellow House members, and it was the focus of a good deal of reworking in committee last week. We have already adopted amendments that would: 1) require STA board representation to be evenly balanced among the major regions of the state, 2) add much greater legislative participation in the selection of board members, and 3) require legislative ratification of the Governor’s appointment of the Secretary of Transportation.

This work to clean up the process of appointing the STA leadership is important, because I am convinced that we need to move forward with the more general provisions of the bill. Georgia most certainly needs a more rational transportation planning process, and a reduction of the competing “alphabet soup” of independent transportation authorities within the state. I think we also badly need to find a better middle ground of how centralized our transportation decision process is.

The present system was implemented over 40 years ago out of a concern that the Governor’s then direct control was too political and fraught with opportunity for abuse. But the current system, while dealing well with those concerns, has proven too decentralized. DOT’s present woes revolve around the fact that the DOT Board’s 13 members compete with each other to get projects approved for their districts – with the process holding little regard for whether each given project has any real value in terms of congestion relief or preparing for future needs.

This has resulted in a Department that has said “yes” to thousands of projects, and then can’t focus itself on those projects sufficiently to weed out conflicts, allocate resources, or often even ensure that the projects that do get worked on are finished in time or within budget. In short, we have to find a workable middle ground on this issue of how centralized our transportation governance is, or we will continue to throw money down the drain. So once we get the leadership concerns of SB 200 dealt with, I hope we can move quickly forward with the bill.

I had a number of visitors during the week. On Tuesday, I had a chance to visit with David Waller of Covington, who was at the Capitol to look into some legislation. Margo Spivey and her son Nigel, who is in 7th grade, were also there that day. Nigel is taking courses from the Georgia virtual school. They were there to explain how the state's virtual course offerings help kids who have health problems or difficulties with learning in a traditional environment. I'm pleased to see this program, which is also very cost effective, benefiting folks here at home. That same day, members of the Morgan FFA came to visit, with their advisors Tim Savelle and Wesley Belcher. We talked for a time in my office, saw Governor Perdue, and then the group had a chance to watch both House and Senate in action. They are a terrific group of kids. I also had three pages during the week. Douglas Moss and Catherine Bishop from Morgan County High School, and Maddison Busbee from Morgan County Middle helped keep the House in order during a busy morning session. They did a fine job, and then each had a photo with Speaker Richardson, and took a practice swing with the gavel. Thanks guys!

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