

A View from the House

By Representative Doug Holt

The House moved into the late phase of the session last week. We were still focused largely on committee work, but several of the 12 bills and resolutions we saw were notable or significant.

HR 1449 is an effort to promote more efficient medicine. Using recent technologies, physicians have the prospect of performing more medical procedures in their offices. Such practices can also reduce costs, which is certainly a big issue these days. Since many of these procedures require mild sedation, however, proper patient safety rules and regulations must be in place. This resolution directs the Georgia Composite Medical Board to create those standards so that Georgia can join the other 26 states that allow this kind of work to be done. I agreed with the measure, and it passed by 152 to 7.

SB 397 would create a "Blue Alert" system, which would be called into effect when a law enforcement officer has been injured and the perpetrator is still at large. The idea is to both alert the public to the danger, and to give people enough information that they can report anything that might help in apprehending the suspect. I voted "yes", and the bill passed by 164 to 2.

Our main floor work was the budget, contained in HB 948. The state (not including federal monies) portion of the budget is down from \$18.6 billion to \$17.8 billion over last year (or about a 4% decrease). When you add in the federal dollars, the overall reduction is down to less than 1%. That's not to say that painful cuts didn't have to be made. A lot of the federal funds can only be used in the fashion dictated by the federal government. This puts us in the sometimes nonsensical posture of having great surpluses in some budget areas, while closely related subjects still had to be cut.

With this being the second straight budget requiring significant cuts to balance, the easy stuff is all gone (for example, the various hall of fame museums are now on their own). Every area of the state government that has direct legislative oversight of spending is now seeing significant reductions. However, our core priorities, namely education, the courts and public safety are only suffering low to mid single digit reductions – other areas are seeing far larger percentages in order to make that possible. Interestingly, during the past two years, this mindset has caused K-12 education to rise from 43% to nearly 46% of the total state budget.

Floor consideration of a budget bill is always a lengthy process, and this one was no exception. The presentation and question/answer period took a number of hours, and then we got into the debate. A fair amount of criticism was delivered, but the discussion never approached anything fiery. When it came time to vote, I supported the budget, and it passed by a moderately bipartisan 120 to 52.

Another budget-related development was the receipt of the revenue numbers for March. For the first time since late 2008, we managed a faint (1%) increase in revenues. Whether this is a final bottoming-out of the recession, from the state's perspective, is still a good guess. Forecasters had told us we could expect returns to level out several months ago, and instead we had two more miserable declines. We will need to see more months of consistent figures to be able to say the numbers are truly firming up. By that time, we will be into the fiscal 2011 budget (starting July 1st). Nonetheless, this development is a long awaited bit of positive news, and it allowed us to pass the budget with a somewhat greater degree of confidence in our present projections.

On Tuesday, Kim Fearnow of Covington was honored with a resolution by the House. We recognized her tremendous work with the Girl Scouts in Georgia. Her efforts with the girls and all aspects of the organization are a splendid testament to the volunteer spirit. With her were husband Greg and daughters Caroline, Maryanne and Savannah. Her parents, Carolyn and Lynnwood Atkinson were also able to join us. I really enjoyed the chance to meet them all and to

help honor Kim. Board of Education member Dave Belton continues his determined work to help win passage of a bill banning texting. He brought students Zach Shepherd, Jake Pendergraft, Caitlin Belton and Katherine Key to talk to lawmakers about this concern. They did a great job of keeping the issue in focus, which is very important considering how focused the General Assembly has been on balancing the budget. On Wednesday, members of the Newton Leadership Collaborative came to meet with those of us in the legislative delegation. Commission Chairman Kathy Morgan, and Mayor Kim Carter and Councilwoman Hawnethia Williams of Covington discussed a number of issues with us, and caught up on current legislative developments. Mr. Kenneth Morgan of Covington also joined in with us.

Contact Info: My office phone is 404-656-0152, and email address is Doug@DougHolt.org.