

A View from the House

By Representative Doug Holt

The House worked through two more legislative days last week, and the final two days will be this week. The days are spaced out to give the Senate sufficient time to deliberate on the budget, which the House passed the previous week. Then a conference committee will need time to work through differences between the two versions that inevitably result. We considered 28 bills and resolutions on the floor, along with dozens of reviews and conferences to iron out differences between House and Senate versions of various measures.

SB 1 would require that the General Assembly use zero-based budgeting. This is a technique in which agencies and other arms of government have to justify their budget requests from the ground up, rather than simply ask for a continuation of a previous appropriation. The bill would require that each budget unit go through a zero-based process every third or fourth year. It would be nice to handle all of them this way every year, but with the General Assembly being a part time legislature, there is simply not enough time during a 40 legislative day session to do so. After the difficulties of composing this year's budget, there was no debate on this measure, and it passed unanimously.

SB 17 is a significant ethics reform, containing more stringent reporting requirements on all officials and lobbyists, and which also creates new provisions on abuse of power, conflicts of interest, improper conduct and sexual harassment. Many fines and penalties for late reporting and other violations have been significantly increased. Transparency of all this information will be enhanced with a focus on making everything collected by the Commission available online. This bill was a response to the lobbyist related issues that brought down Speaker Glenn Richardson last year, and is thus timely and highly appropriate. I still feel some provisions could be stronger, which is why I am a co-signer on HB 920, a competing measure with even stricter requirements, especially on gifts to elected officials. Still, I was pleased to see this bill, since it is nonetheless a very solid measure, and will build on the highly rated system we already have in place. Georgia is currently rated number 7 among the 50 states by the Center for Public Integrity, which maintains an ethics standards ranking of the states. When it came time to vote, I supported the measure, and it passed by 168 to 2.

SB 346 seeks to reform elements of the Georgia property tax code. While much of the bill focuses on making the appeals process more professional and unbiased, the bill also calls for property owners to receive notice of their assessment and likely tax burden every year, not just in years when their valuation has changed. While some felt that this process might be an excessive burden on local governments, most of us thought the right of taxpayers to have dependable information about one of their larger tax bills was the greater concern. I voted "yes", and the bill passed by 137 to 7.

SB 421 would raise the limit on the state's reserve or "rainy day" fund from 10% to 15% of revenues. The sharpness of the present recession has made clear the wisdom of having a larger reserve. The bill passed unanimously.

SB 432 is meant to help extend cell phone coverage more quickly and cheaply, while at the same time minimizing the eyesore of cell towers. The bill seeks to encourage cell companies to place more than one service on a tower by creating a standardized application process for local governments to use in approving permits. In this way, multiple companies can end up using the same tower, rather than each requiring a dedicated network of their own towers. I voted in support, and the bill passed by 165 to 1.

HB 277 is a bill I mentioned a couple of weeks ago. It was a transportation funding measure from last year that got as far a conference committee between the House and Senate, but no further. House Transportation Chairman Jay Roberts had new conference committee members appointed

two weeks ago, in hopes of finding a compromise funding solution. He offered the House a new version of the bill last week, in which 12 regions around the state, corresponding with the existing regional commissions, could independently hold referendums on a ten year, 1% sales tax for transportation capital projects. Each region would select projects from the DOT prioritized planning list to be constructed with the first 75% of the revenues. The remaining 25% would be distributed to the counties and cities for their own local transportation needs. Voters would thus have a specific list of project presented to them when it came time to decide. The bill is a compromise between the statewide approach favored by the House leadership, and the county approach preferred by the Senate. I thought this was a good balance, and voted in favor of the measure. A solid bi-partisan majority agreed, and the bill passed by 141 to 29.

On Tuesday, Dave Belton was back with Alex Sorohan, Mack Mackenzie, Trent Conn and Zachary Shepherd to continue pressing for a texting bill. Since we are very close to the end of the session, this kind of dedication could provide the extra pressure necessary to pull a bill through the crowd of legislation competing to get final passage.

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