

A View from the House

By Representative Doug Holt

After a week of appropriations hearings, we were back in session last week. The facts from the hearings were pretty sobering. Georgia, while not being in the kind of fiscal dire straights that other states are in, has more tough budget decisions ahead. Our initial challenge is to make corrections to the present, fiscal 2010, budget. The first half of the fiscal year (July through December of 2009) saw substantial declines in revenues. While it appears that we may be near the bottom of the downturn, with hopes that revenues will soon flatten rather than fall, the state will still need to pare the present budget down by another \$1.2 billion, out of an original forecast of \$18.6 billion. Efforts by the state (primarily controls by the Governor) and by many local governments have helped greatly towards meeting this reduced revenue stream. But there will still need to be more adjustments. We will continue to spread the difficulty as fairly as possible.

Projections for fiscal 2011 promise a slight increase in revenue, back to \$18.2 billion. Even assuming those projections hold true, this will still be a difficult budget to compose. Many one-time savings have been exhausted in the present budget, as well as what remains of the once large reserve (rainy day) fund. The fact that people are still moving to Georgia, which drives up enrollments for schools (both K-12 and the university system) puts additional pressure on the situation. And the 2012 budget cycle, to be composed next year, will see these same trends, plus the conclusion of the federal stimulus funding. So we really don't anticipate having an easier time composing the budget for at least two years.

Coming back to the present, there are many legislative agendas competing for our attention. I'll turn to new bills in a moment, but there is a positive development worth noting. You may recall me mentioning in the past that I'm a member of a conservative legislative study group. Under the name "216 Group", we met to discuss legislation and benefit from each other's experience and insights. With the torrents of legislation that get aired during Georgia's short sessions, reviewing bills with a group helps one cast far more intelligent votes. We became a bit unpopular with the former leadership in years past, since we were sometimes seen as a source of disquiet about certain policies and pieces of legislation. The new leadership, I'm pleased to report, is much more open-minded and supportive about what we'll do. We are re-launching ourselves more in the model of the Republican Study Committee in the U.S. House of Representatives (to include naming ourselves the Georgia Republican Study Committee), and look forward to helping the Georgia House have a healthy atmosphere of discussion about the many initiatives we consider.

Now on to the "new stuff". HB 936 seeks to extend some flexibility to local school systems in keeping up their bus fleets. It seems that the State Board of Education has, at some point in the past, required that school systems use state funds allocated for school buses only to purchase new buses. The bill would deny the State Board that power, and thus allow local systems to use the money for refurbishing buses.

HB 938, HB 944 and HB 945 all are focused on the emerging concern over "texting" while driving. The three bills take somewhat different approaches to control this problem, from assigning violation points against a license, to fines, and even to three and six month license suspension. Just as in this district I serve, there have been texting accidents around the state. Enough legislators have become concerned to create a fair amount of "buzz" on the topic. It's probably time for the discussion to begin.

HR 1086 is very much a sign of the times. It proposes a referendum to change our state constitution so that it would declare that no person, employer, or health care provider can be compelled to participate in any health care system. It would also specifically authorize persons and employers to pay directly for lawful health care services without penalties or fines being imposed upon them. There is already tremendous support.

HR 1087 also offers a referendum, which would revise and strengthen the constitution's provisions making tax defaulters ineligible for office. It would go so far as to automatically vacate an office upon a finding by the State Ethics Commission (SEC) that the officeholder had violated these provisions. Even more significantly, the amendment would require any seeker or holder of office or appointment to sign a disclosure statement authorizing release of otherwise confidential tax information to the SEC, if requested by that body. This is the strong medicine necessary to deal with the unacceptable tax status of over twenty legislators unearthed a year ago.

I enjoyed visiting with Dave Belton, the school board member from Buckhead, when he came to the Capitol on Wednesday. On Thursday, Brady Ward and Rebekah Parker, both now attending nursing school, came to visit. We discussed several issues important to their new career field.

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