

A View from the House

By Representative Doug Holt

Last week we started seeing bills and resolutions arrive on the House floor for consideration. Our process is a little bit different now, because we have adopted some rule changes requested by our new Speaker, David Ralston. A couple of the changes are worth mention. First, we have eliminated the “Hawk” system. This has nothing to do with basketball: our “Hawks” were four legislators who had the ability to vote in any committee. To the extent that I saw them in operation during the last five years, they showed up when we didn’t have enough committee members in attendance to form a quorum. By their very existence, however, they had the ability to swing a close vote on a bill, and thus opened the House to charges of unfair manipulation. I don’t think we will miss the Hawks.

The other major change was to constrain the Rules Committee to making minor, technical changes to bills. The Rules Committee, whose membership is largely drawn from leadership of both party caucuses, normally acts as the gatekeeper for bills that have emerged from the regular committee process – they decide which ones get to the House floor for consideration. Under the previous House rules, however, the Rules Committee would sometimes perform major surgery on a bill, which could amount to a subversion of the committee process that produced the bill in the first place. I know members of both parties who had this fate befall their bills, and they usually weren’t pleased with the result. So this change was also quite welcome.

During the week, we voted on 11 bills and resolutions. Most were fairly mundane items that either re-authorized existing programs or granted some minor, temporary flexibility in how certain expenditures are handled. A couple were more interesting.

HB 219 seeks to have a “bitterant” added to anti-freeze, primarily to protect children and pets who are attracted to the sweet taste of the product. The primary chemical in anti-freeze is a fairly potent toxin, and small quantities are documented as causing a surprising number of deaths (and have even been involved in a murder). The bill sparked a moderate debate, and questions were raised about the need for a mandate, since much of the industry is already voluntarily adding the bitterant to their products. A surprise turn in the debate came when one legislator pointed out a “gotcha” in the bill, a legal flaw which could unwittingly trap people as lawbreakers. An amendment was offered to fix the problem, but some felt that the fix was not sufficient. I agreed and voted with those urging caution, but the bill passed by 142 to 25.

HB 926 addresses a problem with state banking regulation. Under the strange business conditions of this recession, current regulation is sometimes forcing state chartered banks to close out performing (no payments missed) loans that could otherwise have been very sensibly renewed. The bill would grant an exception for such situations. This kind of problem deserves fixing in any case, but especially now. I voted “yes”, and the bill passed by 165 to 1.

Now for a few new items. HB 995 is another shot at standardizing school calendars around the state. The bill would require that all systems start on September 1st or Labor Day, whichever is earlier. Special interests have driven such legislation in the past, and I want to find out who it is this time.

HB 1011 wants to permit gambling on oceangoing vessels that normally engage in such business, while they are in transit in Georgia waters. The justification is probably revenue.

HR 1146 offers a policy statement regarding the “czars” we have seen being appointed by presidents with increasing frequency, especially under the current administration. The resolution holds that, since the constitutional validity of such appointed officials is a matter of public and congressional debate, the members of the General Assembly of Georgia consider neither

'themselves or the citizens of this state bound to comply with the orders of any presidentially appointed czar'.

On Wednesday, Summer Stevens from Buckhead came to page during a short but very busy session. She and her mom, Sherry, also spoke with me about a legislative concern they have regarding horses. They are a great team! I also saw Dave Belton again, and learned that he is working to help pass legislation he is deeply concerned about. He's seeing how complex and involved the legislative process really is, but looks to be adapting quickly. This kind of private effort demonstrates our system of government at its best, and my hat is off to all these folks!

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