

A View from the House

By Representative Doug Holt

Last week saw us halfway through the session, and things are really starting to move. The committees in the House are passing out 10 to 15 new bills each day, making the job of reading and evaluating proposals the primary work of each day. The investment of time is worth it, however, since the frenzy of legislating that goes on later in the session can see bills announced for a House floor vote with only a few hours notice. By that time, we will have tilted the balance of our day away from committee time, as currently is the case, to more of the day being convened on the House floor.

We worked through 10 bills and resolutions during the week, and a number were significant and/or interesting. HB 122 is a local government transparency measure. It would require that any local government with an annual budget of more than \$1 million provide searchable, online documents detailing their budgets and any audits they have had conducted. The state will provide a standardized website where anyone can review this information. The bill passed unanimously.

HB 249 requires mention for what it does not do, which I can explain after describing what it does do. The bill gives the Georgia Firefighters Pension Fund permission to move up to 5% of its assets into what are called "alternative investments". This refers to venture capital funds and other investments that perform better than traditional vehicles, but are somewhat more risky. The Firefighters have specifically asked for this change. What the bill doesn't do is extend this permission to any other of the pension funds run by the state. When the bill was introduced a year ago, the author tried to include the Teacher's Retirement System and several others. Those groups quickly let us know they wanted no part of such a change, and the bill was sent back to committee. It was released only after being restricted to the one group that wanted the change. On the House floor, it saw little debate, and passed by 155 to 7 (with my "yes").

HB 665 offers a pilot program to allow military and overseas citizens to electronically transmit their absentee ballots. If the pilot succeeds, we will follow up with permanent legislative authorization. Since these folks often do not get to vote due to delays associated with paper ballots, it's time to leverage electronics technologies to protect their right to vote. I backed the measure, and it passed by 165 to 1.

HB 977 would prohibit school systems from giving superintendents and administrators non-step related salary increases from state funds, if the system is furloughing any staff. The bill would also require that systems give public notice if such increases are offered out of local funds or private donations. This bill passed unanimously.

SB 131 is a pretty thorough revision of how trusts work in Georgia. A trust is a legal plan for distributing money and/or property to others. The bill brings Georgia trust law in line with standards adopted by many states, and was the result of almost seven years of work. Some of the more important provisions include increased protections and transparency for beneficiaries. The bill passed by 162 to 2, with my "yes".

At the close of the week, the House and Senate jointly announced a significant change to the session calendar for this year. The arrival of the January revenue returns (down 8.7% over January 2009) have made it clear that the fiscal 2011 budget will have to be even more constrained than anticipated at the beginning of the session. We expect that the Governor will be making a reduced revenue estimate soon, and that we will have to find roughly another billion dollars to cut. To accomplish that, the Appropriations Committees of both House and Senate will be meeting jointly during the next two weeks. The House and Senate will not go back into session until March 8th, and almost all other committee work will be put on hold. This is an unprecedented step, but is a necessary narrowing and focusing of effort to resolve an

unprecedented situation. While many groups have exhorted us to solve the problem quickly and easily with new taxes, that is the wrong answer. I've always held fiscal responsibility as my first priority in public service, and have been proud that Georgia has made strides in the last five years to become one of the states with the lowest spending and debt per capita in the nation. Now is not the time to relax that kind of legislative discipline, especially considering the lack of it being displayed by the federal government. We have an obligation to set the right example.

On Wednesday, Jeffrey Jones of Covington served as a page in the House. He is a very bright kid who shares my love of history. Jeffrey did a great job, and I appreciate his help. Later that day, I had the chance to visit with a group from Morgan County High School. Principal Mark Wilson, Assistant Principal Eric Hamilton and math teachers Brandy Nichols and Mark Argo had come to the Capitol to see State School Superintendent Kathy Cox. We discussed several legislative issues concerning teachers. Wednesday was also Farm Bureau day at the Capitol, and I was able to say hello to the members of the Newton County delegation. B.J. Marks, Brent Galloway, Kevin Mitchem, Lori Dabney and Charles Berry were all there for the event. I appreciate everyone taking the time visit while they were in Atlanta.

Since there will be no general legislative business during the next two weeks, I will resume my reports with events from the week of March 8th.

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