

A View from the House

By Representative Doug Holt

We returned to regular committee work and floor sessions last week. The House and Senate Appropriations committees had made some good headway during the two weeks of focused hearings. This work was rendered all the more important because the February revenue numbers, as half expected, slid by another nearly double digit margin. Georgia saw a 9.9% drop from February of 2009, which was itself down by over 34% from 2008. This makes for more tough decisions, even if we still expect revenue trends to plateau at some point later this year.

Tough numbers bring out tempers, and we saw some of that during the budget hearings. There was a sharp, even if somewhat predictable round of alarmist statements being exchanged between the University System and some legislators. No one actually wants to eliminate 4-H or the extension programs, but such were the charges that flew around for a few days. Level heads have returned, and we are back to more a productive working through the details.

The House spent four days in session, and we considered 25 bills and resolutions. The first significant one was SB 84. This bill has been a work-in-progress for over a year, and it is a response to the loss of accreditation by the Clayton County school system. Loss of accreditation is terrible for the kids in a school system, since it potentially calls into question their ability to move on to college. It is also very negative for economic development (who wants to locate a business in a state with schools that can't maintain accreditation). The bill, in it's original version, had very wide reaching provisions, to include giving the Governor unilateral power to remove school board members. Needless to say, it met a great deal of resistance. Since that time, some of the most extreme provisions have been softened, and we have also seen two other county systems either lose accreditation or be placed on probation. The current version of the bill allows the Governor to temporarily remove board members, but only after a system has been placed on probation by the accrediting agency, and after the State Board of Education issues a finding calling for him to do so. Those members would then have the right to a hearing in which they could lay out their case for reinstatement. The bill also has sections strengthening conflict of interest policies, codes of ethics and school board qualifications. When it was called up for consideration on the House floor, the big surprise was how little heat it generated. While good questions were asked about how some of the provisions would work, there was no vocal or organized opposition. A fair number of doubters remained, but not enough to present any real challenge. I supported the measure, and it passed by 137 to 33.

HB 984 takes a (thankfully) no longer used law off the books. The statute once allowed counties and cities to levy a 1% income tax, under certain conditions. Local governments have uniformly chosen the route of sales and property taxes, which makes it appropriate to remove this tool. The bill passed unanimously.

HB 1073 offers improved procedures for ensuring that military and overseas citizens can cast absentee votes. The process for these folks is often so cumbersome and slow that their votes are either counted too late to matter, or are not counted at all. I supported the measure, and it passed by 161 to 1.

HB 1079 is change to how the Professional Standards Commission, the agency that handles teacher's certificates, can do business. Currently, teachers applying for new or renewed certificates can only pay the required fee by check or money order. This bill would allow them to use credit or debit cards as well. The bill passed unanimously.

HB 1094 is a major water conservation measure. It is a response to both the weaknesses exposed by our recent two-year drought and to the now infamous federal court ruling of last summer (which put Georgia on a time clock to resolve the water dispute with Alabama and Florida). The most important provision of the bill will create a monitoring system to give us a "big

picture” view of water use in the state, upon which any future planning can be based. It contains flexibility provisions that will allow local governments to impose more stringent water use restrictions than the state under certain circumstances. It also tightens the standards for water efficient construction codes by a few notches, while at the same time directing concerned state agencies to construct incentive programs to encourage voluntary water conservation. While I find some of the bill’s provisions a bit heavy handed, I had to agree with most members of the House that the severity of the federal court’s intrusion makes this measure a necessity. The bill passed by 166 to 5.

SB 305 proposes increasing the percentage of projects that DOT can conduct using the “design build” process from 15 to 30%. “Design build” refers to the practice of contracting with the same firm for both project design and construction. It is not appropriate or allowed in all cases, but in those where it has been used, this approach usually yields reduced delivery time and cost (sometimes very significant reductions). I agreed with this change, and it passed by 162 to 1.

On Wednesday, Mr. Fred Greer from Mansfield came to the House for the dedication of a portrait honoring long-time Speaker Tom Murphy. On Thursday, John Sutherland from the Red Oak area was able to come by and watch House proceedings. I had a chance to visit with both, and appreciate their taking time to come visit the Capitol.

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