

A View from the House

By Representative Doug Holt

The House returned to a posture of heavy committee work and light floor sessions last week. Having finished crossover, we are now working on bills the Senate has already passed. The next ten legislative days will see a compressed repeat of the ramp up from committee work to lengthy time on the House floor. As such, we voted on 9 bills and resolutions during the week. Here are a couple that were notable.

SB 206 would require that the Department of Audits and Accounts compile an annual report on all tax exemptions currently in effect in the state. The report is to be completed in time for use during the budget cycle each year. I think it is high time we got a big picture view of tax exemptions, so that we can evaluate whether each one is truly effective in bringing new firms and jobs to Georgia. Any exemptions that don't contribute that way end up being mere tax burden shifts, and need to go. I supported the measure, and it passed unanimously.

SB 319 clarifies the definition of how textbook funds can be used by local school systems. Current law states that electronic learning materials can be purchased with such funds, but the question of whether the hardware (PC's, whiteboards, etc) necessary to employ these materials is a valid use of the funds is unanswered. This bill would make it clear that textbook funds can be used for purchasing hardware. The bill passed unanimously.

SB 341 makes it clear that only legal Georgia residents may receive HOPE GED funds. This was an oversight in the original legislation that needed to be corrected. This bill passed unanimously.

An interesting twist has occurred with the issue of transportation funding. You may have heard about an initiative that originated earlier in the session with the Governor, Lieutenant Governor and the Speaker, and was embodied as HB 1218. The bill sought to create 12 regions around the state, which could independently hold referendums on a ten year, 1% sales tax for transportation capital projects. The bill saw extensive hearings in the House Transportation Committee, where it was amended to a fair degree. One of those changes would have allowed individual counties within a region to opt out of the sales tax referendum if they so chose. While the Governor had indicated a fair degree of flexibility regarding changes to the bill, one thing he said was unacceptable was an opt out provision. So even though the bill was successfully voted out of committee, it moved no further. With crossover day behind us, that bill is dead now. However, the issue itself is not dead. Last year, the Chairman of House Transportation, Representative Vance Smith (who is now Commissioner of DOT), had pursued an initiative of his own that involved a statewide referendum on transportation funding. It was embodied in companion pieces of legislation, HR 206 and HB 277. The two had passed out of the House, only to be dramatically revised in the Senate, away from Chairman Smith's intent. There was no meeting of the minds in the House/Senate conference committee that was named to negotiate a compromise version. Thus the two pieces of legislation were left unfinished, seeing no further action. However, since last year's session was only the first of a normal two session term, the resolution and bill are still "in play", with the enviable status of having passed both House and Senate and being in conference committee. So here is the twist I spoke of: both the House and Senate have appointed new members to the conference committee, and those folks have been meeting to see if they can settle on a new approach to transportation finance. This kind of action qualifies as legislative "high adventure", and the members of both chambers are waiting to see if the conference committee can pull a late-session rabbit out of the hat. Something tells me the twists and turns with this issue aren't over yet.

On Tuesday, Forrest Sawyer, Reverend Willie J. Smith, Joseph Lightfoot and John Martin were at the Capitol and came by to visit while the House was in session. On Wednesday, Board of Education member Dave Belton was at the Capitol, continuing his work in support of a texting

ban, and we had a chance to say hello once the floor session adjourned. On Thursday, Linda Park from Almon came by to discuss concerns with certain bills. My thanks to all for coming by.

The General Assembly will go into recess for the next week, in order to complete more appropriations work. I will return with my next update two weeks from now.

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