

A View from the House

By Representative Doug Holt

Everyone expected this to be a quiet session, since 2006 is an election year: instead we began with a first week that was like a cannon blast.

Everyone guessed Eminent Domain would be the closest thing to a “hot item” this session, but it quickly showed itself to be truly hot. On Monday, the House Civil Judiciary Committee held a hearing on the topic, reviewing bills and taking testimony. Prior to the inexplicable U.S. Supreme Court decision last summer, creating the problem, everyone thought that the definition of “Public Purpose”, for which Eminent Domain could be used, was pretty clear cut. The hearing showed that it is certainly not. At least four bills and resolutions about it are already in play. It quickly became clear that opinions on “Public Purpose” come in a variety of shades of gray. One opinion had it that there should be compensation to businesses that can prove they have been harmed by temporary easements and congestion created during road construction. Another unexpected interpretation held that sites for public schools (which usually don’t have absolute location requirements) was not a valid use for Eminent Domain. My hat is off to the Committee’s Chairman, Representative Wendell Willard, who clearly has his work cut out for him: namely trying to sort through many, often conflicting, ideas, and come up with a consensus. I will keep you up to date on this process as it unfolds.

In other new business, HB 970 ratified Governor Perdue’s Executive Order halving the sales tax on heating fuel during the first three months of the year. While the Governor has the power to suspend collection of the tax, the General Assembly has to actually reduce/forgive the tax. This is much the same as the reduction of the motor fuel tax last September. This bill generated a lot of hot air in session, but passed by a resounding 162 to 2. I voted yes.

Rounding out this intense week, we had a five-hour session Thursday to consider SB 84, which has already become known as the “follow-up” elections photo ID bill. In short, the bill was a reworked answer to loudly voiced concerns about last year’s photo ID bill – primarily about the availability of photo ID for those who are poor, or who can’t get around very well. Having been an elections official, I had passed a number of ideas to the leadership, some of which were incorporated (though I can’t claim I was the only source of them). What the bill does is require that the state will equip and train every county Registrar’s office to issue voter’s photo ID (driver’s license centers will still do so, too). Further, the ID’s will simply be free, period.

Sadly, this was considered insufficient by some, even though earlier discussions indicated it would be. Much rhetoric stated that the very requirement for photo ID was unacceptable. Other objections were raised, as I’m sure you’ve heard through various major media sources. This opposition was mystifying and disappointing to those of us who voted for the bill, because we thought we had come a long way to satisfy concerns. The vote was not even straight party line – several Democrats rose to say that they thought the bill was a worthwhile step forward. The tally was 110 to 64. Despite being disappointed by the unexpected opposition, I will keep listening. My years in elections leave me convinced that, while it must be secure, voting should not be a contentious process.

It was good to visit with Covington’s David and Connie Waller, and Buckhead’s Steve Burch during the week. The week of the 16th will be quiet, due to appropriations hearings. I plan on giving you a quick look at interesting new legislation in my next column.

For your reference: bills live video can be viewed online at www.legis.state.ga.us. Contact Info.: My office phone is 404-656-0152, and email address is Doug@DougHolt.org.