

A View from the House

By Representative Doug Holt

This week, the Land Conservation and Tort Reform bills went to Governor Perdue for his signature. In the meantime, the House forged ahead with new issues.

We voted on 31 items. Several are significant, all which I voted for. You may find it curious that I'm reporting a yes on so many items, but usually it's because there is broad agreement on bills. Though some media outlets like to play on partisan divisions in the House, only 5 of this week's 31 items saw any real division, and even these were not party line votes.

HB 180 will allow the Department of Human Resources (DHR) to make criminal background checks on any employee who would access sensitive information on Georgia citizens, and also on anyone in a household being considered for placement of a foster child.

HB 272 is intended to help obtain tuition and living expense grants for young adults who have been in foster homes. It's very rare that foster parents are willing/able to help children in this way, so we felt the state should help out.

HB 166 provides liability coverage and some immunity from litigation to volunteer health care providers. It's somewhat a companion to tort reform, which was passed for paid health care.

HB 273 authorizes the DOT to start pilot programs evaluating "Flex Lanes", which allow use of emergency lanes and hard shoulder sections of interstate highways for regular traffic during rush hours. The approach has been used with success in Virginia, Maryland and Washington state. While the benefits are obvious, there are potential downsides, so we'll keep a close eye on performance.

HB 188 requires that, upon release of a sexual offender, counties must publish both notice of the individual's selection of residence, and a photo. This passed unanimously, for obvious reasons.

SB 33 (SB, because it came to us from the Senate) creates the "Georgia Virtual School", which is one of the Governor's initiatives. This service would allow children all over Georgia who don't have access to Advanced Placement (AP) courses to be able to take such classes, via computer. Public schools would lose a certain amount of funding for the time a student would be taking such courses, rather than something provided by their school system. However, we made it amply clear to the state Department of Education (DOE) that some money be sent back to local schools to cover overhead and supervision for such students - to be based on the overhead costs appropriate to each system. We gave DOE the flexibility to do this without legislative mandate. However, if they don't deliver on their promise to do so, I think you can count on the legislature making it mandatory.

Now a few unconsidered bills. HB 22 would send sales taxes from vehicles purchased or leased to the counties where the vehicles are register/licensed. This is an obvious gain for an area like ours which has many vehicles brought in from other counties.

HB 161 will put a permanent moratorium on placement of Social Security numbers on driver's licenses.

HB 177 would make it unlawful for any arm of government in Georgia to hire illegal aliens.

On Thursday, Danny Stone brought this year's Leadership Newton County classes to the Capitol to meet with Senator Douglas and myself, and to see the legislature in action. A lot of sharp folks in the group, who asked some very intelligent questions. It's good to know we have such high caliber future leaders in Newton. Many thanks to Danny Stone and others who work on this program for their great efforts.