

A View from the House

By Representative Doug Holt

The House went back up to 31 bills and resolutions considered this week. Among the measures passed were the conference committee version of the supplemental budget (thus ready for the Governor now), and the first draft of the 2005/2006, or "big" budget.

Here are this week's "notable" bills. I voted yes on all.

First, we agreed to a Senate bill, SB 125, which will create a statewide tourism marketing program, along with supporting supporting measures for the program. This bill is ready to go to the Governor.

Another interesting bill was HB 340, which places restrictions on information about donors to public colleges and universities. The law would not restrict inquiries about who gave and how much, but would protect from more extensive inquiries demanding disclosure of assets, tax records, wills/trusts and other more personal data on donors. The minority party leadership tried to equate this with the temporary cloak over negotiations that HB 218 would have created, but common sense, and the realization that private institutions are not subject to such inquiries, ruled the day. The vote was 129 to 30.

Finally, we considered the Governor's ethics passage. The first bill was HB 85. This bill provoked a great deal of debate. As the press has reported, it was re-worked in the House. However, the re-working was not as dramatic as some parties have tried to imply. The primary changes were as follows: First, two sections were removed be covered in separate bills, which I will describe below. Second, enforcement of the conflict of interest laws was left with the State Attorney General, rather than being moved to the Ethics Commission. The final major change was that the gift cap remained at \$101. Some of the new restrictions the bill includes are:

- Increases the fines for ethics offenses, starting at \$1,000 for a first offense, \$5,000 for a second, and going up to \$10,000 for third and subsequent offenses.
- Extends the statute of limitations for reporting a complaint to 3 years.
- Requires a public official to reveal business ownership interests of a spouse or dependent children that are more than 5% or greater than \$20,000 in value, in addition to the official's own interests.
- Requires lobbyists to disclose state agencies lobbied.
- Lobbyists must report any client that pays them more than \$20,000.
- Ends the "revolving door" of elected officials leaving office and immediately engaging in lobbying. There is now a one year waiting period before a former official can start lobbying.
- Nepotism is banned.

The bill definitely is a long step forward from current ethics standards, and I'm sure we'll do more in future sessions. Despite all the political posturing, the vote was a resounding 163 to 3.

The first of the other two bills in the package, HB 664, would put restrictions on legislators trying to pressure the Department of Corrections regarding location and release of inmates. Many questions were asked about this one, from both sides of the aisle. In the end, the bill was tabled, pending some work to clarify its language.

The other ethics bill, HB 665, will protect whistle blowers who report fraud, waste or abuse in state government from retaliation. This bill sailed through with a strong, bi-partisan majority.

On Wednesday, Julia Richardson (no relation to the Speaker) and Mary Sheets of Newton County served as pages for the House. They did a great job and had fun doing it. They also had a chance to visit with Governor Perdue and have a photo made with him. My thanks to the girls for serving.