

A View from the House

By Representative Doug Holt

After last week's rush to get bills and resolutions in before crossover day, this week was comparatively quiet. Most of the action was in committee, where we have started reviewing bills passed by the Senate; to see if we concur, or want to amend them. We considered 17 items on the House floor this week.

First, a couple of items I saw in committee (and voted yes on). In the Insurance Committee, we amended SB 174, the "Small Business Employee Choice of Benefits Health Insurance Act". This bill would give small businesses (15 employees or less) a health insurance option that includes hospitalization coverage, along with the other most essential benefits covered by full scale health plans. I don't have space to list all the other covered services, but the ones I received calls about are on the list. The bill addresses the fact that a high percentage of small businesses can't afford full scale health plans, and so offer nothing. SB 174 would provide a lower cost option, so that some businesses could provide coverage.

SB 267 was also in Insurance, and deals with abuse of handicapped parking permits. Permits would be issued every two years, instead of four (but the price will be halved), and the color of the permits will be changed every two years. The color red will be reserved for temporary permits. This will make it easier to spot vehicles with expired permits. The bill also makes it unlawful for people without a disability to use a permitted vehicle to park in handicapped spaces (unless the permit holder is with them) - and there will be fines for violations, from \$100 to \$500. Having seen many people abuse handicapped spaces over the years, I am highly in favor of this bill.

Now, on to House floor action. SB 121 would deal with a problem affecting people with toll road accounts (accounts give them a permit sticker allowing them to go through the toll booth without stopping, with a scanner detecting their permit and automatically charging their account). The State Road and Tollway Authority has been getting Freedom of Information requests for the data in each account, which can include social security, credit card, bank account, and phone numbers. The Authority has been holding back on these requests in expectation that the General Assembly will address the issue - hence SB 121. The bill would allow release of the names of account holders, but none of the other data mentioned above. The bill had broad bi-partisan support. I voted yes on a passage of 165/2.

Finally, I cast a no on SB 133, which would have allowed the sale of sparklers. Many of our esteemed local firefighters contacted me on this, and pointed out that modern sparklers are far more powerful than earlier ones. I know some folks feel that this should be an issue of family responsibility, but testimony of a nurse who served in burn units helped nail the issue for me. She described the uncomprehending terror in the eyes of very young children who have been burned by sparklers. It became clear to me that enough families are un-responsible that the greater good calls for keeping the ban in place. SB 133 did not pass.

Our home school essay contest winners, Sarah Wibell and Sarah Wood, served as pages on Monday, and did a great job. They had a chance to visit and have a photo with Speaker Glenn Richardson.

Also, I enjoyed visiting with the Newton Board of Education's Chairman Rickie Corley, member Almond Turner, and Superintendent Dr. Clamp. They were at the Capitol working to increase awareness of the education needs of a very fast growing county.