

Under the Gold Dome



District 149 Legislative Update– January 2015– Session



Session Update- Week 2

Although the General Assembly was not technically in session last week, the Capitol was far from empty and those of us chosen to serve on the Appropriations Committee were very busy. Legislators, state agencies and citizens from around the state gathered to learn what Governor Deal has in store for Georgia's proposed budget. Tuesday, January 20th marked the beginning of what we refer to as, "budget week". Budget week gives us the opportunity to look closely at all proposals put forth by Governor Deal, without interruption of other session obligations. The only thing that we are constitutionally required to do during our 40 day session is pass a balanced budget. While coming up with a balanced budget seems simple enough, it is actually a huge undertaking. Imagine trying to balance your own bank account; however, this bank account has billions of dollars in it and comes with a thousand different relatives trying to persuade you to fund their cause. All the while, you are fighting to keep a few dollars in the bank for those that you have been tasked to look after. This description, in a nut shell, is budget week. It is hard enough to balance one budget under these circumstances and we are actually in charge of balancing two. Over the past week, we have been working on an amended budget for the current fiscal 2015 year and a full budget for the 2016 year. As a member of the House Appropriations Committee, it is part of my job to ensure that each dollar is spent responsibly for the betterment of our government and especially House District 149.

House and Senate appropriations committees held a series of joint budget hearings throughout the week. This gave us the opportunity to closely examine Governor Deal's recommendations as well as hear testimony from various State agencies that are in need of funding. These requests are often necessary to maintain our infrastructure and growing population demands. The good news is that Georgia's economy continues to improve, meaning we have a little bit of "new" money in the budget. Even better yet, we are expected to have more growth in 2016. Governor Deal's budget includes an addition of \$276 million in "new" funds and the 2016 budget projects an additional \$670 million increase. Unfortunately, after the mandated expenses we are required to pay, that "new" money does not go as far as we would like it to.

As I mentioned last week, education is a huge priority for Georgia. With more companies moving into the state, we must ensure that we have a prepared workforce, ready to take on new jobs! Therefore, Governor Deal recommended the majority of "new funds" be directed towards our education system through various programs. This is great news for our school systems and students, as I know they are in need of additional resources to ensure success. For 2015, the governor designated \$15 million for local governments through the Forestland Protection Grant, including \$8.3 million that will go directly to local school systems. The budget also includes \$35 million in grants designed to increase broadband internet access in classrooms across the state. The education trend continues through the 2016 budget, which includes a half billion dollars in new funding for the Department of Education and local school systems. More great news for educators, the Governor has set aside funding for pre-k teachers to have two planning days. Educators are not the only winners in this scenario. Georgia students seeking higher education will feel financial relief as our students will see an increase in awards for HOPE scholarships and grants. The governor also recommended an additional \$6 million in low-interest loans for higher education. With education costs through the roof, this is wonderful news for those that plan on continuing their studies.

The farming community could also see possible changes under the proposed budget. Governor Deal's 2016 budget proposal recommends significant changes to the Georgia Soil & Water Conservation Commission (GSWCC). Under the proposal, GSWCC will no longer be a standalone agency, but a part of the Georgia Department of Agriculture. Opponents of this budget proposal are weary that this could negatively impact GSWCC's grassroots trust relationship with farmers. GSWCC has long been an agency to assist farmers and landowners in their voluntary participation in programs to conserve soil and water resources. A similar measure was brought forth last year, but never moved forward when members of the farming community voiced concerns. I am interested in hearing from the farmers in our district concerning this issue. Agriculture is one of the most important industries in our state and we need to make sure that Georgia farmers have the resources they need to continue their success.

Last session, we saw legislation brought forth considering the allowance of medical cannabis oil to treat children suffering from traumatic and life threatening seizures. I personally spoke to parents that encountered their child having hundreds of seizures a day. It was extremely difficult to see these Georgia families under such duress, feeling helpless, in search of relief for their children. Other states that have implemented cannabis oil of treatment for seizures have seen success in patients. We want our children to have the best medical care possible and many families have left Georgia in search of cannabis oil treatment. Governor Deal has allotted nearly \$4.9 million for clinical trials through Georgia Regents University. These trials will study the effectiveness and safety of cannabis oil in children with certain types of seizure disorders.

I am personally pleased that there has been money placed in the budget for the remodeling and reopening of the state prison in Cadwell, located in our district. This means that there will be hundreds of new job opportunities for our citizens! I would like to thank Governor Deal for his work on ensuring that this project is properly funded. As your state representative, it is a priority for me to ensure that our district citizens are taken care of and prepared for the future. After the end of a long week, the balancing act continues. House Appropriation subcommittees will continue to research the governor's budget proposals. Our subcommittees will eventually pass portions of the suggested budget out of our respective committees. While the budget is still under review in the house subcommittees, I will be working diligently to find extra funding for our district. One of my top priorities for our budget is to see that state employees who have suffered financially during the recession receive a long overdue increase in salary. Once we have completed the work of the various subcommittees, the budget will then be sent to the full House Appropriations Committee for further review. If the committee approves the proposals of each sub-committee, we will vote to pass the 2015 amended budget and continue to work on the full 2016 budget. The budget then makes its way to the Rules Committee, which is the last check and balance before it heads to the floor for a full vote. If the House passes the budget, it then moves over to the Senate side and the process begins all over again. If the Senate makes changes to the budget, it will then be up to the Speaker of the House and Lt. Governor to appoint a Conference Committee from each Chamber in order to reach a compromise. Once the compromise is made, the budget will then go back to each chamber for full approval. If both the Senate and House agree on the budget, it goes to the Governor's desk for his approval and signature.

As you can see, it is never easy to pass legislation. Even the legislation that is required to be passed by law! Each and every bill must go through the same long process as the budget. With literally a thousand bills coming from every direction, this process can be mentally exhausting. While it may be tiring to be on the go for literally, 40 days and 40 nights- I wouldn't have it any other way. Representing the people of our district is a true honor and I am more than grateful, that you have given me the opportunity to learn from you, to listen to you and most importantly, to serve you. If you ever need anything at all, please reach out to me at anytime. Thank you again for your support, words of encouragement and much needed prayers!

