

# Under the Gold Dome



District 149 Legislative Update– January 2015– Session



## *Session Update- Week 3*

As I have mentioned, during session the Capitol is extremely fast paced and last week was no exception. As appropriation hearings to review the budget continued, other committee meetings began, wasting no time looking at proposed legislation drawn up by House and Senate members. Although we just finished the 8<sup>th</sup> legislative day, there has already been 254 pieces of legislation put forth for review! To put this in perspective for you, during the 2013-2014 legislative term the House of Representatives reviewed over 2,000 bills and resolutions. And that number does not include the many Senate Bills that come over to the House to be examined. So while 254 seems like a lot, we still have a long way to go. This week many of Georgia's hot issue topics began making their way through the process.

### **Budget**

On Thursday, January 29<sup>th</sup>, we unanimously passed the 2015 midyear budget which runs through June 30<sup>th</sup>. The mid-year budget includes \$128 million extra for school systems with growing enrollments, and \$40 million for economic development grants. It also contains:

- \$35 million to expand broadband Internet connectivity in local school districts.
- \$16 million to pay for rising costs in Medicaid, the state health care program for the poor and disabled, brought about by the federal Affordable Care Act.
- \$5 million to hire 103 additional caseworkers in the Division of Family and Children Services.
- \$4.8 million to begin medical marijuana trials.
- \$515,000 to establish a Georgia Film Academy to train future employees for the state's growing film industry.

The spending plan also contains language supporting the idea of providing health coverage to school bus drivers and cafeteria workers. We added that phrasing in response to Gov. Deal's proposal to save \$103 million by discontinuing state subsidies for health insurance for about 11,500 part-time school staffers. Unfortunately, there is a proposal in the budget for fiscal 2016, which begins July 1 and under the current language, part-time staffers would lose the insurance as of Jan. 1. The budget now moves to the Senate for further examination.

### **Transportation**

Transportation is of course one of the top priorities for Georgia. On Thursday, House leadership unveiled a transportation plan that is expected to raise more than \$1 billion a year to go towards transportation, without raising taxes. House Bill 170 proposes changes to the current way taxes are collected. As it stands now there is an excise tax (indirect tax charged on the sale of a good) and several state and local taxes on motor fuel. The proposal supports a state transition from many taxes to one excise tax which would be absorbed directly by the state's transportation fund. In short, Georgia citizens will be paying the same amount per gallon but the money will simply shift from a sales tax to an excise tax. Right now nearly every local government levies three different special option taxes on fuel. One for general use, one for education and one to offset property tax cuts. Under this plan, once the local taxes expire, local governments could impose a local excise tax of 3 cents per gallon; however all of that money would be required to go towards transportation. The new plan would also allow local governments to enact new special option sales taxes, but it would exempt motor fuel from the tax. In addition to these tax structure changes, alternative fuel vehicles will be required to pay a \$200-\$300 user fee so that they too are contributing to the transportation fund.

*Transportation continued...*

I want to ensure you that I am looking at this proposal with my House colleagues very closely. The last thing we want to do is pass a quick solution filled with unintended consequences. I don't expect that this debate will be settled until the final hours of the session and while this proposal is a great start, we will still need to study the bill properly before making any movement.

### **High School Students Earn Diplomas after 10th Grade- A Possibility**

On Wednesday, January 28<sup>th</sup>, the Senate Education and Youth Committee unanimously passed Senate Bill 2 which says high school students wanting to pursue college early would be able to do so after 10th grade and receive a high school diploma for their college course work. Senate Bill 2 would allow certain high school students to enroll in a college or university if they can pass a college entrance exam and have completed freshman- and sophomore-level high school course work. When they complete a degree or certificate program, their college-level courses would satisfy 11th- and 12th-grade requirements and allow them to also receive a high school diploma. This legislation is said to fight against the "one size fits all" education standard and allows those students that have chosen their career paths to begin training at an earlier age. SB 2 is strongly endorsed by the business communities who have voiced concerns in the past that lack of skilled workforce has forced companies to look outside of Georgia. Supporters of SB 2 also say that this legislation will help improve high school drop-out rates. This bill now moves onto the Senate Rules Committee for review. This is great news for our students who have already begun working on their college course work while in high school!

### **Georgia Aquifer Water Storage**

The debate on Georgia's aquifer storage program continues. Legislation was introduced in the House on Wednesday that, if passed, would permanently prevent the injection of surface water into the Floridian Aquifer in several counties in Southeast Georgia. The bill would prohibit what many consider to be the risky practice of pumping surface water into the aquifer for use at a later date. The process is known as aquifer storage and recovery. Opponents of the practice say the surface water that is pumped in can contaminate the aquifer. The aquifer is the primary drinking water source for most of South Georgia. Those in favor of the water storage program say injecting treated surface water into the aquifer is an efficient way to preserve water supplies that in some parts of the state are dwindling. The practice of aquifer storage began in 1999 and some believe that the storage process poses "significant threats to the reliability and physical integrity of these natural water supplies." If passed, the bill would prohibit aquifer storage in Brantley, Bryan, Camden, Charlton, Chatham, Effingham, Glynn, Liberty, Long, McIntosh and Wayne counties.

As you can see above, I have mentioned only a few bills that have been presented this year. Again, I encourage you to track and follow legislation that concerns or interests you! You can visit: [www.legis.ga.gov](http://www.legis.ga.gov) and click on the Legislation tab to follow all proposed bills. I will continue to brief you on all the happenings under the Gold Dome the remainder of this session. Thank you for allowing me to serve as your Representative; it is an honor for me to represent our area. I promise that I will continue to fight for the betterment of Georgia and especially for the betterment and advancement of District 149. God bless each and every one of you and may God continue to bless our great state! As always, if you need anything at all, please feel free to contact me anytime.

