

# Under the Gold Dome



District 149 Legislative Update- February 2015– Session



## *Session Update- Week 7*

Last week at the Capitol began Monday, February 23<sup>rd</sup> marking the 20<sup>th</sup> legislative day. Hard to believe that we are over half way finished with the 2015 session! Now that we are nearing Cross-over Day (day 30), the tempo has picked up for everyone. So far the House of Representatives have passed 42 pieces of legislation that are now under review in the Senate. Last week was eventful as we passed a number of key bills.

### **House Bill 72- 2016 Fiscal Year Budget**

The only bill that the General Assembly is constitutionally required to pass during any session is a balanced budget. On Thursday, February 26<sup>th</sup>, we passed the 2016 Fiscal year budget. This budget will be a guideline for state spending from July 2015 through June of 2016. After many appropriation meetings and a few compromises, we were able to come up with a budget that we believe will cover our main priorities for the upcoming year. With a 4.5 percent increase from the 2015 fiscal year budget we were able to concentrate additional funding for education, including continued State Health Benefit Plan coverage for non-certified school employees, such as bus drivers, transportation and rural healthcare. Below are a few highlights of where the new revenue will be spent:

- K-12 education funding total \$571.9 million
- Higher education funding total \$116.4 million
- Transportation funding totals \$265 million
- Rural Georgia Healthcare facilities funding totals \$3 million

I am also pleased to report that the rural healthcare budget items include Wheeler County, which will receive a \$250,000 start up grant for a much needed Community Health Center! This budget is just a starting point and is now headed to the Senate for their review. If the Senate agrees to the 2016 House version of the budget, it will then be sent to the Governor's desk for his signature.

### **House Bill 1- Medical Cannabis Oil Passes House**

House Bill 1, Hallelujah Hope was overwhelmingly passed in the House on Wednesday with 158 votes in favor of medical cannabis oil for certain conditions. House Bill 1 would make it legal for Georgians with certain medical conditions to obtain cannabis oil legally in another state. We are hoping that this brings relief to the many Georgia families that have had no choice but to move from our state to seek medical cannabis oil treatment. There are limits as to what illnesses qualify for the oil. Illnesses include cancer, multiple sclerosis, seizure disorders, ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease), Crohn's disease, Parkinson's disease, mitochondrial disease, sickle cell disease, and fibromyalgia. Individuals suffering from these conditions would be allowed possess cannabis oil with a maximum of 5 percent THC and a maximum amount of 20 fluid ounces of cannabis oil. THC or Tetrahydrocannabinol is the chemical that causes the high when using marijuana. Low levels of THC are said to have minimal effects and do not create the high associated with recreational use of cannabis. Patients would also be required to register with the Georgia Department of Health to be placed on the, "Low-THC Oil Registry". Registrants will also be required to carry an ID card. Finally, HB 1 creates the Georgia Commission on Medical Cannabis to examine the possibility of future policies related to medical cannabis oil in our state.

*Medical Cannabis Continued...*

This commission will be charged with making a recommendation for the potential regulatory infrastructure for the creation of an in-state growth/distribution model of medical cannabis, and must make its recommendations to Governor Deal by December 2015. Before Georgia makes any allowances on expanding medicinal cannabis oil, we want to ensure that every bit of information is available to us. We have full trust that this commission of experts will do a great job in researching this subject, providing us with information needed to make future decisions on this subject. This legislation now heads to the Senate Health and Human Services Committee for review.

**Rural Hospital Stabilization Committee**

Over the past few years our rural hospitals and healthcare systems have been struggling. In response to this ongoing issue, Governor Deal released the final report of recommendations from his Rural Hospital Stabilization Committee. The Committee was established last April and was created to provide solutions for the needs of our rural hospitals. Among the recommendations is to begin a four-site pilot program designed to relieve cost pressures on emergency departments, ensuring that patients receive the best treatments possible. Geographically, most of Georgia is what the federal government refers to as "medically underserved area". Due to the lack of primary care doctors, coupled with high poverty rates, many Georgians have been forced to seek medical attention in emergency rooms of the nearest hospital. Our own Dodge County Hospital CEO, Kevin Beirschenk has said that of all ER care; about a quarter is never paid for. This pilot program will create "medical hubs" where patients can seek treatment for ailments that are not necessarily deemed, emergencies. The "hubs" will then be able to communicate and share records with a hospital participating in the program. The hospital then directs the best solution for the patients care. The pilot programs will be located at Union General Hospital in Blairsville, Appling HealthCare System headquartered in Baxley, Emanuel Regional Medical Center in Swainsboro and Crisp Regional Hospital in Cordele. Governor Deal has allocated an additional \$3 million dollars in this year's budget to the State Office of Rural Health to fund the necessary tools for the pilot program. As a member of the Health and Human Services Committee, I am relieved that steps have been taken to address our rural healthcare issues and I applaud Governor Deal on his efforts. In the future, I will continue to fight for funding to ensure that our rural healthcare systems continue to see improvement!

As we continue the countdown to Day 40, I will be here to update you on all major issues we are working on. If you need anything at all, please let me know. My top priority is to hear your concerns. As always, it is an honor to serve you and I am so grateful for the opportunity to work for the great folks in District 149.

