

Under the Gold Dome



District 149 Legislative Update - March 2015- Session



Session Update- Week 8

Monday, March 2nd marked the 24th legislative day of 40. As the clock continues to tick, the pace has picked up as everyone is trying to make sure their legislation is moving forward. To give you an idea of what it's like during this time- our days begin before the sun comes up and they do not end until well after the sun goes down. We are in meetings on top of meetings and in between the scheduled meetings; we are being briefed as we walk down the hall about other pieces of legislation. Needless to say, it is busy. This week was a productive week as we passed a number of bills, including the much anticipated transportation bill.

House Bill 170- Transportation

The highly debated "Transportation Act of 2015" made its way to the House Floor for a vote on Thursday, March 5th, passing in a 123-46 vote. As the bill moved through the committee process there were a number of changes made to the original legislation first presented. To fully understand the bill, you need to be a little bit more familiar with our tax system. Currently, we have two types of local sales taxes in place. We have taxes that are permanent (local option sales tax) and applied to everything you buy, including gasoline. Then we have, a Special Local Option Tax (SPLOST) that is an additional tax voted into place by the public. SPLOSTs are put in place for a limited amount of time and provide funding for specific projects and they also apply to everything you buy. HB 170, if passed in its current form, would end the permanent local sales tax on motor fuel, other than SPLOST, after July 1, 2016. Any SPLOST revenue that is raised from taxing ONLY motor fuel will be required to be spent on transportation. For the first time in history, this bill will take ALL fuel tax collected and put it towards transportation. Research analysts have shown that there will be a slight increase on gas per gallon (2.5 cents to 6 cents). In my opinion that's a small amount to pay in order to keep our roads and old bridges safe. Many are overdue for major repairs and to ensure safer travels for our families, we have no choice but to act now. I really wish there was another way as I despise taxes of any kind. Under current law as gas prices rise, so does the taxable amount. HB 170 will keep the same excise tax on gasoline regardless of price fluctuations. Here is a breakdown of the bill as it stands now:

- Removes all state sales and use tax from the sale of motor fuels
- Various taxes currently in place will be consolidated into an excise tax of 29.2 cents per gallon
- Bill would repeal \$25 million jet fuel tax break for airlines
- Would also remove the \$5,000 tax credit for those who buy electric cars

In the 1960s and 70s Georgia invested a great deal of money into transportation. As a result, we have the world's busiest airport and are considered a key destination for logistics. The good news is that because of those investments, we have grown at a phenomenal rate, creating great new job opportunities and our state economy. The bad news is, those investments are no longer keeping us afloat. Georgia's population growth, along with the wear and tear of our transportation systems has damaged our infrastructure. It is a top priority for us to ensure the safety of Georgia drivers and currently, our transportation systems are not safe and in dire need of repair. In order to continue our growth, we must once again establish a strong transportation system. The bill has not seen the last of its changes as it now moves to the Senate chamber for consideration. The faster this bill moves through the process, the longer we have to review and compromise on it. As I stated on the floor, you elected me to lead; not to shy away from tough issues. This issue is a tough one, because "doing nothing" is not an option and unfortunately, there is no way that we can make everyone happy. We can, however, speed up the general process so that there is time for reconsideration and compromise over the legislation. With the looming deadline of Day 40, I felt it was necessary to get this bill over to the Senate for their recommended changes sooner than later. Now that the bill is in the Senate, we will be exploring other ideas and solutions.

Opportunity School Districts

On Wednesday, March 4th the State Senate cleared the way for Governor Deal's proposal of "Opportunity School Districts". Senate Resolution 287 passed as a constitutional amendment that would allow the question of Opportunity School Districts to be placed on the 2016 ballot. SR 287 was paired with Senate Bill 133 which creates a statewide "Opportunity School District" headed by a superintendent appointed by the governor that would take over the operation of under-performing schools, convert them to charter schools or shut them down. The statewide district would be limited to taking over 20 schools a year and only schools that have seen 3 years of failing results would be eligible for the program. Those in favor of Opportunity School Districts believe this is a step in the right direction needed to improve our education system. Those opposed to the bill fear that it will eliminate the idea of "local control" in education. The Governor recently went on a fact finding mission to Louisiana, touring schools in New Orleans that have seen success under a similar program. The measure now moves to the House for review. With a needed two-thirds vote for it to pass as a constitutional amendment, House Republicans will need a swing vote from the Democrats in order for the new proposal to make it to the Governor's desk.

Religious Freedom Restoration Act

The Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) was passed on Thursday, March 5th in the Senate. RFRA is intended to protect the exercise of religious expression by people of faith, without the intrusion of government. In 1993 RFRA was passed by the US Congress on a national level with bi-partisan support. However, in 1997, the Supreme Court passed down a ruling that the national RFRA does not apply to individual states. Since 1997, 30 states have adopted their own RFRA. Opponents of the bill claim that RFRA legislation opens the door for discrimination, alleging that somehow individuals will assert their religious belief as a reason to refuse service or engage in other discriminatory conduct. Supporters of the legislation claim that this measure is necessary to protect the religious liberties of all Georgians. The bill now heads over to the House, where we will further review the legislation.

I will continue to report on what is happening under the Gold Dome for the remainder of the session! As citizens, it is important for you to be knowledgeable about what is going on with your state government. As your Representative, I welcome your suggestions and ideas and encourage you to contact me anytime. I would also like to ask all of you to pray for my administrative assistant at the Capitol, Jan Brown. Jan's mother passed away this week after an unexpected heart attack. Jan is a huge help to me and I know prayers for her family will bring them comfort. Thank you for allowing me to lead and represent you. It is an honor to serve the folks of our great district!

