

Under the Gold Dome



District 149 Legislative Update– Session Preview 2016



As we gathered with family and friends over the holiday season, many of us would reflect on the last year and begin planning for the new. Resolutions of Health, Wealth and Happiness are on the minds of most! While it is true that the New Year brings hope, excitement and an opportunity to begin anew, for me and other members of the General Assembly, the New Year also brings a new session, new issues and new debate. As your Representative, I have more than a few resolutions I am working on for the betterment of our state and district.

“What will the General Assembly work on in 2016?” is a question I receive more than any other this time of year. I can’t be sure of every issue that will arise; however, I can make an educated guess on a few items that will be discussed. Below is a rundown of major issues will likely be up for discussion during the 2016 legislative session.

Education Reform

Last January, Governor Deal announced the creation of Georgia’s Education Reform Commission. The commission, made up of education experts, as well as, a number of legislators held study committee meetings throughout the year. Georgia’s funding formula, improved educational standards and increased access to early learning programs are just a few examples of what the reform committee was tasked to review. In November, the commission completed a report of recommendations for Governor Deal’s review. Their report will largely determine education legislation during the 2016 session. I look forward to reviewing the full committee report and hearing debate as education issues arise.

Funding / Appropriations

2015 has been a positive year where the state budget is concerned. Going into the 2016 session, we are expecting a surplus of funds. With education reform measures on the table, it is likely that more money will be pumped into K-12 education. We have made large strides in recent years where education funding is concerned and I look forward to seeing what else we can do on a state level to further support our education systems.

Georgia Gambling

The allowance of pari-mutuel wagering on horse racing has been a hot topic in recent sessions and now, the stakes are even higher with proposed legislation to allow for casino gambling. Currently, the only “gambling” allowed in Georgia is the Lottery system, which funds Georgia’s HOPE scholarship program. With an increase in HOPE recipients and needed program funding, the General Assembly will consider House Bill 677 and House Resolution 807. If passed, HB 677, paired with HR 807 would allow Georgia citizens to eventually vote on casino gambling. Those in support of these measures believe this is a great way to ensure the continuance of Georgia’s HOPE scholarship program. Those opposed fear that legalized gambling will lead to increased crime and gambling addiction rates. Supporters have yet to convince Governor Deal, who has stated he is not currently in favor of casino gaming coming to the Peach State.

Religious Measures

In 2014 we saw the introduction of The Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA). After heated debate, this issue will return, along with other religious liberty measures including the “First Amendment Defense Act” (FADA) and the “Pastor Protection Act”. While these measures are all intended to protect religious liberties in our state, each proposal is different and offers separate protections.

Religious Measures (Continued)

RFRA is intended to protect individuals from Government intrusion on people of faith. FADA is intended to protect individuals and businesses from forced participation of activities that are against their religious beliefs, such a florist or baker that does not wish to service same-sex weddings. The Pastor Protection Act would ensure that Pastors/Rabbis are protected from being forced to perform same sex marriages. Supporters of these measures believe that legislation is needed to protect Georgia citizens against interference of religious expression and personal beliefs. Opponents claim that the proposals open the door for discrimination.

Gun Control

Like past sessions, the topic of Gun Control will make an appearance during this year's session. Pre-filed gun control legislation, such as House Bill 709, has already begun. HB 709 would require the completion of firearms safety training by certain persons for the issuance of a weapons carry license. In 2014, we passed House Bill 60, which allows Georgians to legally carry firearms in a wide range of new places. We also expect "campus carry" legislation, which would allow firearms on college campuses, to be up for discussion. Governor Deal, who is strongly in support of 2nd amendment rights, has commented on the importance of allowing people who follow the rules to protect themselves and their families from people who don't follow the rules. Governor Deal has stated, "The Second Amendment should never be an afterthought. It should reside at the forefronts of our minds." I couldn't agree more.

Medicaid Expansion

With thousands of Georgians without healthcare insurance, some members of the General Assembly are pushing for the expansion of Medicaid for people who fall into no coverage category. Governor Deal is not in favor of expansion and says that the state can't afford to expand an already burdened program. Governor Deal estimates that expansion would cost the state nearly 4 billion dollars over the next 10 years. Opponents of Medicaid expansion believe this is a temporary fix to a larger problem, being our flawed national healthcare system. Supporters of expansion say the measure is necessary to combat future healthcare costs which may go up as a result of those that are uninsured. Other states, such as Arkansas have expanded with the condition that the state uses additional funding to provide private insurance for citizens through the public marketplace. Healthcare is always a top priority as we search for solutions to improve Georgia's health rating and 2016 will be no exception.

Tax Reform

Georgia tax reform measures will be up for discussion as we look for ways to improve our current tax code. Last session House Bill 445, a comprehensive tax reform plan was brought forth. In short, HB 445 would lower Georgia's current income tax (both for individuals and corporations) to a flat 4 percent, while raising the state's sales tax to 5 percent from the current 4 percent. Those in support of tax reform insist that allowing folks to bring home more money will stimulate the economy. Those against the measure believe that taxing needs such as groceries and other staple items will negatively impact low income families.

As you can see, the 2016 session will hold no shortage of debate and discussion as we muddle through these issues. The first of forty days begins on Monday, January 11th. I encourage you to contact me throughout session with questions, concerns or ideas regarding proposed legislation. Please be on the lookout for my weekly legislative updates as I will continue to keep you informed. As far as 2016 and what it holds, no one can be sure. However, there is one goal that I will have no trouble meeting... I will continue to work hard for you; serve you and when needed, protect you. Thank you for allowing me to work on your behalf. I wish all of you a memorable holiday season and for the New Year? I wish you nothing but- Health, Wealth and Happiness!

