

# Under the Gold Dome



District 149 Legislative Update – Session Week Six — 2016



Friday, February 19<sup>th</sup> concluded the sixth week of the 2016 legislative session. With 24 legislative days complete, we are nearing the very important “Crossover Day” deadline. Crossover day is the last day that House Bills can transfer or “crossover” to the senate chamber with enough time to make their way through the “process” of committee hearings and a floor vote. As this deadline rapidly approaches, all legislators are working tirelessly to ensure bills pass out of their respective chamber. Last week we passed, arguably the most important legislation of the 2016 session, the 2017 Fiscal Year budget. We also passed a number of measures aimed at improving education and healthcare for the terminally ill.

## **2017 Fiscal Year Budget**

The passage of House Bill 751 brings us a step closer to completing our constitutional obligation of passing a balanced budget. The 2017 budget is to date the largest budget in our state’s history at \$23.7 billion, which is an increase of \$673.9 million over the amended FY2016 budget. Education, transportation, healthcare and economic development were among our top funding priorities. Below is a quick reference of budget allocation in each area.

### **Education Funding**

Education still remains a priority as we work to ensure our school systems receive needed resources to be successful. With over half the budget going towards education funding, we feel confident that this will help fill the needed gaps in Georgia’s workforce.

- \$300 million appropriation for K-12 education for local school boards to give salary increases, eliminate furlough days or increase instruction days for education.
- \$5.1 million for a 3 percent pay raise to teachers in Agriculture Education and Tech/Career Education programs, school bus drivers, lunchroom workers, nurses, and Regional Education Service Agency (RESA) employees.
- \$28.6 million in funding for Pre-K teachers for salary increases up to three percent, as well as increasing salaries for assistant teachers
- \$59.1 million for Zell Miller and HOPE Scholarship recipients
- \$29.4 million in funding to the Move on When Ready dual enrollment program
- \$1.2 million to the North Georgia Military Scholarship Grants program
- 100,000 each for large animal veterinarians and the Georgia National Guard to address the need for skilled individuals in those fields
- \$44.4 million for formula earnings based on enrollment and increased square footage at both the University System of Georgia and the Technical College System of Georgia

### **Healthcare**

Over the last few years our state has recognized the critical need to reevaluate our healthcare system. One primary focus has been that of rural healthcare. With the close of numerous hospitals, rural Georgians are lacking in options for quality care. As a member of the House Health and Human services committee, I was proud to see funding for initiatives which include increased access for rural Georgia citizens.

- \$66.7 million to offset Medicaid enrollment growth in our state
- \$200,000 to maintain the rural dentistry loan program
- \$100,000 to establish a loan repayment program for physician assistants and advance practice registered nurses

*Budget Continued....*

- \$100,000 for the Georgia South Family Medicine Rural Residency Training Program
- \$200,000 for OB/GYN physicians who want to return to practice in underserved areas
- \$250,000 start-up fund for the Champions for Children program, also known as the “Katie Beckett waiver,” which provides grants to families with medically fragile children who do not qualify for Medicaid

**Criminal Justice Reform**

Criminal Justice Reforms remain a priority as we have seen positive results in Georgia. Since the implementation of reform programs, state juvenile justice facilities have seen a 25 percent decrease in population. Further, the creation of Georgia’s accountability courts has reduced crime by 45 percent, saving the state more than \$51 million in prison costs in 2015. Educational programs teaching job skills has made the transition into society easier and made Georgia’s prison re-entry rate the lowest in 30 years. We will continue work on Criminal Justice Reform with additional funding for program expansions in the 2017 budget.

- \$3.8 million to expand the state’s accountability courts, which are aimed at providing community alternatives, as proven alternatives to sentencing, to rehabilitate offenders and juveniles
- \$5.6 million to support educational initiatives in the state prison system, including operational costs for two charter high schools and expansion of GED fast track, vocational, and general education programs

**Transportation**

As a result of House Bill 170, the Transportation Funding Act of 2015, we have been able to allocate \$825.6 million of new transportation dollars to improve our state’s transportation infrastructure. Sound infrastructure is key to future growth and the Georgia Department of Transportation has done a great job in outlining current and future projects. I encourage you to view their website and the list of upcoming transportation projects at [www.GAroads.org](http://www.GAroads.org).

- \$543.1 million are budgeted for capital construction and maintenance projects
- \$204.7 for routine maintenance
- \$41 million in Local Maintenance and Improvement Grants
- \$1 million in bonds were also allocated for the repair, replacement, and renovation of our state’s bridges to ensure safety for all who travel on our roadways

**Education Measures**

The first of two education bills was House Bill 798, which would change some requirements for the HOPE and Zell Miller Scholarships. HB 798 would allow home schooled students and students graduating from previously ineligible or non-accredited high schools an opportunity to earn scholarships. Eligibility requirements for these students to receive HOPE are as follows:

- Home schooled students and students graduating from ineligible high schools that score in the 75th percentile or higher on standardized college admissions tests, such as the SAT and ACT
- Students who score in the 93rd percentile or higher nationally would be eligible for the Zell Miller Scholarship.

The bill also changes the Zell Miller Scholarship eligibility for students graduating from eligible high schools by requiring a score in the 80th percentile or higher on the ACT or the SAT, in addition to maintaining a minimum 3.7 GPA. It is our hope that with these changes Georgia will keep the state’s brightest students through college, while allowing even more students a chance to achieve higher education goals.

House Bill 879 is the second education bill we passed, which creates the “Georgia Seal of Biliteracy” to recognize high school graduates who are proficient in speaking, reading, and writing one or more languages in addition to English. Students may qualify to receive the Georgia Seal of Biliteracy by meeting the following requirements:

- Scoring of four or higher on a foreign language advanced placement exam
- Scoring of five or higher on a foreign language international baccalaureate exam
- Completing a four-year high school course in a foreign language with an overall GPA of 3.0 or above in that coursework
- Passing the SAT II foreign language exam with a score of 600 or higher

The Georgia Department of Education would attach the insignia to qualifying students' diplomas, indicating their success in the program. Local school systems can opt-in to the program but are not forced to participate. Offering the Georgia Seal of Biliteracy will promote the study of foreign language, while certifying a student's knowledge on future college and job applications.

### **Georgia Right to Try Act**

House Bill 34, also known as the "Georgia Right to Try Act," was unanimously passed last week. The legislation allows terminally-ill patients faster access to experimental drugs and procedures that have passed the first of three phases in the FDA drug approval process. Unfortunately, full phase clearance by the FDA can take as long as ten years. HB 34 gives patients the option of trying experimental treatments that have passed the FDA's Phase 1, meaning treatments have met required safety precautions. Physicians would be required to provide written documentation statements of the following:

- The individual has a terminal illness
- Patient has considered all other treatment options currently approved by the FDA
- Patient has been given a recommendation by the physician
- Patient has given written informed consent for the use of the investigational drug biological product, or device

Manufacturers of certain experimental drugs will not be required to offer or charge for treatment. Similarly, health benefit plans have the option to provide coverage for experimental drugs, but are not be required to cover costs. Further, any medical physician, who recommends, prescribes, or treats an eligible patient with investigational drugs, would not be held liable by the Georgia Composite Medical Board. Currently, 24 other states that have similar legislation in place and we are hopeful Georgia will be the 25<sup>th</sup>. Enacting this type of legislation will be a great step in offering relief for Georgia's terminally-ill patients.

### **Official State Dog**

We unanimously passed legislation in the House this week making the "adoptable dog" Georgia's official state dog. House Bill 561 will help promote animal rescue, adoption, and responsible pet ownership. The National Council on Pet Population Study and Policy has found by encouraging responsible pet ownership the number of unwanted dogs ending up in shelters will be greatly reduced. Unwanted dogs face a higher probability of being euthanized and we passed this bill in part to raise awareness on the importance of animal adoptions. Eligible "adoptable dogs" are available through local animal shelters, humane societies, and public or private animal refuge organizations.

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.



Jimmy Pruett  
Georgia House of Representatives, District 149