

Under the Gold Dome



District 149 Legislative Update – Week 8 — 2018



Rural Revitalization

Last week, we continued our rural revitalization efforts by passing House Bills 951 and 887. Two measures that I believe will be very beneficial to our district.

If passed into law, HB 951 would create the Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation (CRPI) to serve as a central information and research hub for rural leadership training. Community planning models, best practices, industry-specific assistance and cooperative efforts will be addressed through the CRPI. The center, located within a chosen University System of Georgia institution, will also award Bachelor of Science degrees in rural community development. Further, the bill creates a 12-member Georgia Rural Development Council which will be responsible for guiding the center on needs to address issues and problems affecting rural economic development, education, unemployment and infrastructure. The bill designates a deputy commissioner for rural Georgia under the Department of Economic Development. Serving as a rural “think tank,” we are confident that the CRPI will bring valuable resources and offer viable solutions to address the challenges which face the less populated areas of our state.

House Bill 887

Broadband access concerns would be addressed through the passage HB 887, if signed into law. The bill would expand broadband and other communication services across the state by establishing the Georgia Communications Services Tax Act. The act would require public communication providers to meet certain criteria prior to working in underserved areas. HB 887 also allows municipal corporations and electrical membership corporations (EMCs) to provide broadband service in unserved areas within its corporate limits. Additionally, the bill allows communities to apply for a “broadband ready” certificate through the Georgia Emergency Management and Homeland Security Agency (GEMA). Finally, HB 887 would regulate an authority's pole attachment rate.

Medical Cannabis Oil Expansion

Those in favor of expanding Georgia’s medical cannabis oil program, remain optimistic with the passage House Bill 764. The measure, which received overwhelming bipartisan support, adds PTSD and intractable pain to the current list of qualifying medical conditions allowed to be treated under our states low THC oil program. Upon a doctor’s recommendation, eligible individuals seeking this type of treatment, will be required to sign-up under our state’s THC Oil Registry. Individuals could legally possess a maximum of 20 fluid ounces of cannabis oil with a maximum of 5 percent THC.

Hidden Predator Act

Last week, we unanimously voted to expand Georgia's Hidden Predator Act. House Bill 605 would hold accountable negligent individuals or entities, who conceal the act of child abuse. Expansions under the bill are as follows:

- Extends the statute of limitations for childhood sexual abuse cases from age 23 to age 38.
- Lengthens the discovery period from two years to four years for victims experiencing psychological or emotional problems because of sexual abuse.
- Establishes a one-year period for an abuse victim to file civil actions against an entity if: the entity was responsible for the victim's care; knew or should have known of the conduct that brought about the civil action; or intentionally or consciously concealed evidence of sexual abuse.

Changes to this law align us with scientific research and past cases dealing with sexual abuse charges, acknowledging that the effects of childhood sexual abuse often don't surface until a victim reaches adulthood.

Distracted Driving

Sadly, cell phone usage while driving has led to record breaking numbers of traffic fatalities and accidents nationwide. House Bill 673 works to address public safety concerns by establishing Georgia's hands-free driving law. HB 673 would prohibit drivers from holding, supporting or reaching for a wireless telecommunication device or a stand-alone electronic device while operating a vehicle. This measure also bans drivers from the following: texting; browsing the internet; watching videos; recording videos. Drivers will be permitted to use GPS navigation and voice-to-text features on their devices. Those convicted of violating the hands-free law would be fined and charged with a misdemeanor. Further, first-time offenders would receive a 2-point deduction on their driver's license and establishes a staggered point deduction system for repeat offenders. The law would not apply to:

- Those in a vehicle lawfully parked
- Those reporting an emergency or a hazardous road condition
- Utility service providers, law enforcement officers or first responders operating who are working

Fraud Protection

As Credit card and identity theft continues to grow, we passed House Bill 866 to incentivize citizens to participate in fraud protection programs. HB 866 prohibits credit reporting agencies from charging a fee to freeze or unfreeze consumer accounts. Currently, credit reporting agencies may charge a fee up to \$3 for each security freeze placement and may charge up to \$10 per account to remove the freeze. HB 866 removes all associated fees.

Military Measures

Cross Over week also brought the passage of House Bill 718, aimed at further supporting our state's military families. Under the bill, schools could grant students up to five excused absences to attend a military affair sponsored event if a student's parent or guardian currently serves or previously served in the armed forces, Reserves or National Guard. The legislation does require students to present proper documentation prior to the absence, and absences may not exceed five days per school year for a maximum of two years. Each Georgia school system will be able to determine whether they accept or reject the additional excused absence policy under the bill.