

Under the Gold Dome

District 149 Legislative Update – Week 5 & 6 — 2017



The past couple of weeks has been extremely busy as we continue our work on behalf of our great state. As we have reached the halfway point in the 2017 session, we are working tirelessly to ensure that our legislation makes it through in time of the crossover day deadline which is set for legislative day 28, two days earlier than in years past. Crossover day is important because it is the last day that your bill can pass, with time to make it through the other chamber before day 40. Despite mounting pressure and little time, we will continue to muddle through the hundreds of bills up for review.

On Tuesday, January 7 we passed House Bill 146 which would require fire departments to provide and maintain adequate insurance coverage for firefighters serving 12 consecutive months and unable to work due to a disabling cancer diagnosis. Because of their work, studies show that firefighters have higher rates of certain types of cancers than the rest of the population. Listed below are provisions of HB 146 that will assist these brave men and women with the financial strain of rising medical costs:

- Provides for a lump-sum benefit of \$25,000 or \$6,250 based on the severity of the cancer.
- Provides a monthly benefit equal to 60 percent of the firefighter's monthly salary at the time of diagnosis, or a monthly benefit of \$5,000, whichever is less.
- Benefits would begin six months after the firefighter has submitted proof of their diagnosis and would continue for three years.
- Provides coverage for volunteer firefighters who are unable to work due to a cancer diagnosis.
- Provides volunteer firefighters would receive a monthly benefit of \$1,500 for the same three-year period.
- Would allow firefighters to maintain their insurance coverage upon retirement or a career change, but recipient would be responsible for paying insurance premiums in those scenarios.
- Authorizes counties and cities to use tax revenue to purchase insurance for firefighters covered under this bill.

Eligible cancers covered under HB 146 include bladder, blood, brain, breast, cervical, esophageal, intestinal, kidney, lymphatic, lung, prostate, rectal, respiratory tract, skin, testicular, thyroid, leukemia, multiple myeloma or non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

In addition to passing HB 146, we also unanimously passed House Bills 83 and 84, which would support the Georgia Firefighters' Pension Fund. The Georgia Firefighters' Pension Fund was established in 1955 to provide a supplemental pension benefit to Georgia's firefighters and their beneficiaries through assets held in trust. HB 83 would allow the Georgia Firefighters' Pension Fund to invest up to 10 percent of its total assets in real estate, which is currently prohibited. If the fund's assets decrease in value, the fund may retain the real estate investments as if they were owned prior to the decrease in the fund's assets. This measure will ensure that this fund remains healthy for future beneficiaries.

Similarly, HB 84 would give the Georgia Firefighters' Pension Fund the ability to invest up to 10 percent of its total assets in alternative investments, such as private investment pools, private investment funds and venture capital funds, amongst others. Under current law, the Pension Fund can invest up to 5 percent of its total assets in alternative investments. If passed, HB 84 would double the investment percentage allowance from 5 to 10 percent. HB 83 and HB 84 offer greater flexibility and investment options for the Firefighters' Pension Fund, in turn, helping the organization provide better benefits for our heroic firefighters.

House Bill 176

Protecting our Agriculture industry remains a top priority as we passed House Bill 176. HB 176 is intended to improve the overall functionality of the Georgia Department of Agriculture. Currently, under the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) the federal government is responsible for directing inspections of certain farms and packing houses. However, HB 176 gives the Georgia Department of Agriculture the ability and flexibility to conduct inspections, as well as, take other regulatory actions necessary to assist the FDA within the provisions of the FSMA. In short, HB 176 allows the Georgia Department of Agriculture the ability to enforce federal law independently of the federal government, which will only help streamline the inspection process. As a strong advocate of “local control,” I feel confident that Commissioner Black and his team are more than capable of handling these inspections, which is why I voted for the bill.

House Bill 75

This week, we unanimously passed legislation that would change open records laws involving minors. House Bill 75 would protect Georgia’s youth by allowing law enforcement agencies to confidentially share vital information regarding child abuse, neglect or dependency investigations within the Department of Human Services, which includes the Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS), and other governmental child protective agencies. Currently, any shared information between law enforcement officials and child protective agencies are subject to open records requests. As you can imagine, pending investigations of child abuse and neglect could put other children in danger if a perpetrator is allowed to access records, learning that they are under investigation. If passed, law enforcement officials will be allowed to privately share certain information with DFCS and other protective agencies in order to keep children safe who are in danger of abuse, neglect or dependency. HB 75 will ultimately close the open records requests loophole by ensuring such information is kept confidential until the investigation is complete.

Week Six

The most important measure we addressed last week was HB 44, the full 2018 Fiscal Year budget, which will serve as the spending guideline for the 2018 fiscal year. A balanced budget is the only thing we are constitutionally required to pass over the forty-day legislative period. The FY 2018 budget is set by a revenue estimate of \$24.9 billion.

As education continues to be our top priority, the 2018 FY budget allocates nearly \$780.2 million towards education initiatives. Perhaps most importantly, the FY 2018 budget will provide that \$162 million is dedicated to a 2 percent merit pay increase for our hardworking teachers. The 2018 budget also includes that bus drivers and school nutrition personnel receive a 2 percent salary increase. Education budget funding also includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- \$1.6 million for Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) trainers and school climate specialists to help reduce disciplinary incidents and promote school safety.
- \$2.7 million in new and existing funds to provide one AP STEM exam for every student taking an AP STEM course.
- \$4.05 million to fund additional school counselors for all school systems in Georgia.
- \$445,145 for a competitive grant program available to school systems that have a large military population intended to fund counselor positions, providing additional support to students of military families.
- \$1.5 million for the Governor’s Office of Student Achievement grant program, that will provide low performing high schools with a certified school counselor-graduation specialist.
- Quality access to healthcare also remains a focus and legislative priority, as we have allocated additional funding towards many physical and mental healthcare initiatives. For that reason, HB 44 includes budget money for several key services including, but not limited to:
- \$14.9 million for relative foster parents caring for and raising our state’s foster children.
- \$25.8 million for a 19 percent salary increase for child welfare services caseworkers.
- \$500,000 to expand the Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) to advocate on behalf of our children.
- \$6 million for the creation of a Behavioral Health Crisis Center which would address emergency crisis needs for individuals struggling with mental illnesses by providing care 24/ 7.

Budget continued...

- \$2 million for Georgia Alzheimer's Project, promoting early detection and treatment for early detection and treatment.
- \$38.4 million for Medicaid growth.
- \$20.7 million for behavioral health services for children under 21 who are diagnosed with Autism.
- \$2.5 million for behavioral health services for children ages 0 to 4.

As an avid supporter of our Veteran and military population, I was also extremely pleased with the 2018 budget allocations in regards to benefiting our military service members and their families. Georgia boasts one of the largest military communities in the Union and I am proud to support any effort aimed at improving military benefits. Listed below are military funding initiatives included in the 2018 FY budget:

- Funding for additional school counselors to school systems serving large military communities.
- \$358,996 for four veteran benefits training officers who would work with the Veterans Accountability Court, serving those who have entered the criminal justice system upon returning home from combat.
- \$137,650 to fund a women veteran's coordinator to assist our female veterans.
- \$359,437 for the Georgia Military Pension Fund to continue fiscal soundness and sustainability.
- Establishment of the Military Family Support Center in Marietta, a commissary that would sell discounted groceries and household goods to active-duty and retired military personnel and their families, which would service over 400,000.

One final key highlight of the FY 2018 budget is the appropriation for pay raises within various Georgia agencies which include the following:

- 20 percent salary increases for state law enforcement agents, impacting officers and criminal investigators across 16 state agencies.
- \$2.6 million for public safety training to support and adequately train state and local law enforcement officers.
- Funding for additional Georgia Bureau of Investigation personnel.

We also passed, House Bill 1, known as the Georgia Space Flight Act (GSA). GSA would define procedures for commercial space flight activity, allowing us to be more competitive with neighboring "space friendly" states. I was proud to co-sponsor this bill that if signed into law, will bring the estimated \$330 billion per year space industry to Camden County in South Georgia. I have no doubt that Spaceport Camden would have a tremendous impact on our state economy as well as support tourism and job growth in Georgia.

In addition to passing the 2018 budget and HB 1, we also passed HB 9, which would close the privacy law loophole that currently allows the practice of "upskirting"; HB 139 to promote transparency within our Georgia school systems. With the "big budget" handled, we will now be concentrating our efforts on the more controversial issues such as the allowance of casino gaming and the expansion of medical cannabis. In the meantime, I will continue to send updates with all that is happening with your General Assembly. If you have questions or concerns, please reach out to me anytime. As always, thank you for allowing me to serve as your voice under the Gold Dome!