

Under the Gold Dome

District 149 Legislative Update – Week 7 — 2018



My colleagues and I returned to the House Tuesday, Feb. 20, to resume our legislative business for week seven of this year's session. The closer we come to "Cross Over Day," set for this Wednesday, the more aggressive our agenda becomes. Last week, the House voted on several bills as our committees worked overtime to hear important legislation before this week's deadline. Measures passed included bills dealing with tax reform, rural revitalization, education and support of our military members.

Tax Reform

Of the many bills passed this session, the most notable has been House Bill 918, which creates various tax cuts for our citizens. After being closely examined in committee, the bill made its way to the House floor last Thursday, where it passed overwhelmingly. This legislation will decrease the tax burden on citizens by cutting individual and corporate state income taxes. Stipulations of the bill are as follows:

- Doubles the state standard deduction for Georgia taxpayers for all filing statuses, effective Jan. 1, 2018.
- Reduces the income tax rate for individuals and businesses from 6 percent to 5.75 percent beginning on Jan. 1, 2019.
- Reduces the tax rate to 5.5 percent on Jan. 1, 2020, upon approval of the General Assembly and sitting governor.
- Eliminates the sales tax on jet fuel to help our state be more competitive.

Further, this bill does address state revenue projections resulting from recent Federal Tax Cuts and Jobs Act. As the largest income tax cut since 1937, HB 918 is a win for our citizens who deserve to keep more of their hard-earned money.

Rural Revitalization

Last week, we also passed three bills recommended by the House Rural Development Council's (RDC) legislative recommendations. These bills aimed at assisting our rural communities came in the form of HB 769, HB 735, and HB 876.

House Bill 769 works to improve quality rural health care access. Health care provisions under the bill are as follows:

- Allows for remote pharmacy orders, updating credentialing and billing practices under the direction of the Department of Community Health.
- Establishes the Rural Center for Health Care Innovation and Sustainability which will provide training and health data analysis focused on rural health.
- Allows for micro-hospitals, defined as a hospital in a rural county that has two to seven inpatient beds and provides 24/7 emergency services.
- Creates a grant program for physicians practicing in medically underserved rural areas of the state.

As health care access has been of major concern, this measure was the first RDC-related bill to pass the House. We are hopeful the bill's wide-ranging health care provisions will allow our health care systems to thrive in rural Georgia.

Rural Revitalization Continued....

The second rural revitalization effort passing last week was House Bill 735. If passed into law, HB 735 will create an income tax credit for track maintenance expenditures on owned or leased short line railroads. Mirroring Federal legislation, this tax credit would be 50 percent of the maintenance expenditures during the taxable year. The bill does cap this credit at \$3,500 per mile of railroad track. Short line rails serve as a lifeline to our rural communities, and this measure which incentivizes investment in rail infrastructure, boosts reinvestment, while creating jobs, will further connect rural Georgia to the rest of our state.

Also passing last week was House Bill 876. This bill would prohibit counties and municipalities from banning the use of wood products as construction material, if the products meet the state minimum standard codes, including the Georgia State Fire Code. Several cities in the Metro Atlanta area have banned wood products from being used in construction in buildings over three stories high. Bans such as this greatly impact the wellbeing of our tree farmers and sawmills, most which are headquartered in less populated areas of the state.

Education and Mental Health

In an effort to assist our children dealing with mental health issues, we passed House Bill 853. Under current law, public school students receiving treatment in medical hospitals are exempt from tuition and fees, but students who are referred to psychiatric residential treatment facilities are not. HB 853 changes this policy. The bill would allow public school students who are admitted under a physician's order into a licensed psychiatric residential treatment center to be exempt from paying tuition or fees to a local school system. Approximately 300 to 500 students are treated at Georgia mental health centers annually. This legislation allows students seeking care to continue their education and stay on track academically while receiving long-term medical and psychological treatment.

Human Trafficking

As we continue to fight the horrific practice of sex trafficking, we passed House Bill 732. HB 732 expands the definition of sex trafficking to include anyone who patronizes sexually explicit conduct from a sex trafficking victim. The bill ensures that individuals who knowingly engage in sexual acts with victims of sex trafficking are prosecuted. Anyone who commits this offense would be charged with a felony, resulting in a prison sentence of five to 20 years. Sadly, our state is ranked sixth in the nation where human trafficking is concerned. While there is much to be done, this bill is a step in the right direction.

Military Measures

Support for our military continues with the passage of House Bill 840, which exempts active-duty military members serving in combat from penalty fees regarding certain unpaid taxes. Fees included in the exemption are those unintentionally unpaid such as: special, occupational or sales taxes as well as, license, regulatory or administrative fees. While the bill does not exempt active-duty members from paying these taxes all together, it does give them 60 days from the time they return from their military service to make full payment on taxes due without the penalty fees.

As you can see from the report above, we have been extremely busy! The pace will only continue to increase as we head into the final five weeks of the legislative session. I will continue to update you on issues affecting our state and district. As always, if you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me anytime. Thank you for your trust in me as I continue to work hard on your behalf!