

Senator Ben Watson's Update from the State Capitol Week of March 19, 2021

The Georgia Senate has completed our thirty-fifth day of 40 session days. When we return Monday, we will have five legislative days to the end of this session. The last day is expected to be Wednesday, March 31.

This session, and over the past few years, our state has made substantial progress in the field of foster care and adoption. We passed an additional measure this week, House Bill 114, in support of these children. Under current law, an income tax credit may be claimed for foster children, capped at \$2,000 per qualified child. This bill would raise that cap to \$6,000 for the first five years and \$2,000 for every subsequent year. This increased credit will support those Georgians who engage with our foster care system and will bring more prospective foster parents into the process, which will help more children be placed into loving homes. The legislation unanimously passed.

Due to Georgia's continued economic resiliency in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are in a strong enough position to pass some of that success on to all Georgians. House Bill 593, the Tax Relief Act of 2021, proposes an increase in the standard deduction that will lower the tax burden for Georgians, but especially for those in most need. In these times where so many are still experiencing financial hardship, we owe this tax cut to the families who worked tirelessly to steer our state through the uncertain waters of the pandemic and ensure that Georgia remained the best state in the nation in which to do business, with our AAA bond rating secured. It is a testament to the strength and resolve of our workforce that a tax cut is even possible, even as the pandemic begins to subside, and we will continue to work to lessen the financial burden so many in our state continue to experience. I am proud to see this bill pass and look forward to bringing additional tax relief to Georgians.

There are difficult decisions pending regarding local legislation that will only affect Chatham County. As part of the Chatham County delegation, I am aware that there has been much talk about reform of the beleaguered Chatham Area Transit System (CAT), which for years has been plagued by Board infighting, allegations of corruption and legal suits. Another area rife with problems is the Chatham County election system that splits the duties between the Chatham County Board of Elections and the Chatham County Board of Registrar. Both boards agree of being united to streamline vote counting and services but how to do that falls into the lap of the legislative delegation. The last issue is the City of Savannah wanting an increase in the hotel/motel tax and the implementation date while hoteliers fight to remain competitive in these pandemic times. Next week, I will report on these issues as we expect some finality on all of this local legislation for this session.

Thank you for your continued interest in the General Assembly session. As your public servant, feel free to visit me at the Capitol or to reach out to me by phone or email. I am in 325-A Coverdell Legislative Office Building. My office phone number is (404) 656-7880 and my email is ben.watson@senate.ga.gov. I look forward to serving you.