

Your Georgia General Assembly has crossed the halfway point of the 2021 legislative session. By the end of the week, we have completed legislative day 27 and are moving closer to the end point of the 40-day session which will be targeted for the end of March. In addition, "Crossover Day" is Monday, March 8, or the day that all House bills must pass the House to be considered by the Senate.

As a House leader in crime prevention initiatives, we easily passed House Bill 94, legislation that ups the ante on theft of stolen mail and packages. With people receiving benefits checks and other important mail and parcels, and in an effort to prevent these thefts, we passed H.B. 94 that would create a new felony crime of "theft by possession of stolen mail," with resulting punishment of between one to five years in prison. A person is guilty of the crime if he or she possesses stolen mail addressed to three or more different addresses and possesses a minimum of 10 separate pieces of stolen mail. The bill also designates a new felony crime of "porch piracy," with resulting punishment of between one to five years in prison. A person is guilty of the crime if he or she takes or removes any envelope, bag, package, or other sealed item of another person from that person's porch, steps, or entranceway without that person's permission.

We also passed H.B. 363, we easily passed an elder abuse law with real teeth in it. Too often, offenders of the elderly, usually from family members or caregivers, this bill would escalate punishment for elder crimes. The bill adds a new definition for "abuse of access" and references that definition in the definition of "exploit". The examples of elder abuse are disturbing and after many years of dancing around the issue, we have taken this issue and put it at the forefront that the ill-treatment of our senior citizens will not be tolerated.

Turning to our election process and the concerns many of us had after the 2020 campaign season, we passed H.B 531, a comprehensive election reform bill that came out of the Speaker of the House committee dedicated to election reform. Some of the key points of our effort include that no election superintendents or boards of registrars shall accept private funding thus preventing non-partisan and partisan groups from establishing collection points for ballots and other efforts to undermine the government structure in place to hold free and impartial elections. The legislation also directs that in a precinct with more than 2,000 electors, if the voting wait time was more than one hour for the previous general election, the superintendent must either reduce the size of the precinct to less than 2,000 electors or provide additional poll workers or equipment before the next general election. To eradicate ballot harvesting, the legislation would allow an elector to apply for an absentee ballot beginning 78 days prior to the election until 11 days prior to the election and requires absentee ballot applications to be received by the board of registrars or an absentee ballot clerk no later than 11 days prior to the election.

Most importantly, the legislation requires the outer oath envelope of the absentee ballot to include a space for the elector to provide his or her driver's license or identification card number and his or her date of birth. If the elector does not have a driver's license or identification card, the elector must provide the last four digits of his or her social security number. If none of the above can be provided, the elector must include a copy of an approved form of identification. Voter identification is one way to guarantee that the free and fair election process will only allow one person, one vote mantra that is essential to our democracy.

In conclusion, I encourage you to please let me know of issues that are important to you in Effingham County and Chatham County. I am in office 401 of the State Capitol. My office

phone number is (404) 656-7855 and my email is bill.hitchens@house.ga.gov. I look forward to this session and serving all of you.