

Our two local representatives in the Georgia General Assembly gave their summary of Georgia's legislative results this year. Dr. Ben Watson has just been elected as Chair of the key Senate Health and Human Services Committee. Rep. Jesse Petrea has authored several key Bills about to be signed into law by the Governor.

Overall 279 bills were introduced by the Senate (with 57 senators, 36 Republican) and 701 by Representatives (with 180 total Representatives, 103 Republican). 234 total Bills were then ratified by both Houses and ready for Governor signature (104 first originating in the Senate).

Voting Reform – House Bill 316

This is unique combination of streamlined electronic voting with a fail-safe backup system of a backup paper trail, should an audit be needed to validate the election. According to Jesse Petrea, this was opposed by the Democrats in Georgia who preferred a pure paper ballot.

School Safety – Senate Bill 15

This requires a threat assessment and a communication coordination by local public schools. The state budget includes \$70 million to allocate \$30,000 to every school in the state to implement the recommendations.

Oyster Farming – House Bill 501

A hundred years ago Georgia led the nation in harvesting oysters, which faltered due to a decline in canned oysters. Now Georgia can begin to restore this industry by allowing leases on inter-tidal water bottoms to establish recoverable traps of growing oysters.

Shoreline Protection – House Bill 445

This fixes the ambiguity of shoreline definition being based on the location of 20-foot trees, many of which have long been changed or eliminated. The new law, if signed by the governor, would create a 25-foot regulated zone that would promote dunes as a major protector against storm surge from a hurricane. Indeed, some of today's dunes have holes to ostensibly allow pedestrian access. These actually allow flood waters to penetrate inland. Access should be via boardwalk over the dunes.

Military Retirement Pay Tax Exemption – HB 7

Carried over to 2020, this would exempt military retirement pay from state income tax. There are some 61,000 now on duty across 13 military bases in Georgia. A number of them might like to settle in Georgia for a second career, with critical skills useful for jobs now available in the private sector in Georgia.

Preserving Historical Monuments – Senate Bill 77

creates a misdemeanor and treble damages for destroying or damaging public or private historical monuments.

Georgia Budget

The new statewide budget of \$27 billion was approved within the balanced budget guidelines required by law. This has grown faster than most states because of Georgia's growing economy and population. Georgia is only one of four states that have retained a AAA bond rating for the past 22 years and throughout the financial crash in

2007/2008. The new budget also includes a contingency reserve of \$2.5 billion for unforeseen crises.

Health Features of Georgia Budget and Legislation

Georgia never fell for the ObamaCare lure to expand Medicaid eligibility to those earning 138% of the federal poverty level. The offer of full subsidy was only for a period of time before reverting back to state payments.

Medicaid is not really insurance, and many doctors do not like the price controls of the federal government, and many counties have a real shortage of practitioners such as obstetricians and general medicine.

Instead Georgia's "Patients First Act" seeks waivers for using Medicaid funding for the "Georgia Way", where the goal is to get service to patients without their having to use hospital emergency rooms for primary care medicine.

Jesse Petrea also introduced a measure to actually replace ObamaCare with a better system, which will be completed next year. It is complex but workable, and it retains free market principles to avoid ObamaCare's basic premise of the federal government taking over one sixth of the American economy and reducing choices.

House Bill 233 prevents pharmacy benefit managers from gaming the system. House Bill 324 allows licensing of marijuana growing for medicinal oil without the "high" of marijuana, and not for recreational use.

House Bill 481 – the "Heartbeat Bill" - bans abortion once the baby's heartbeat is detected in the womb. Other states will likely contribute to getting this to the US Supreme Court, possibly overturning Roe v Wade Decision of 1973. That decision was rendered under "privacy" concerns, as the Court admitted there was little evidence on when life begins in the womb.

Q&A Session

Q1. Was anything more done this year to promote allowing weapons in classrooms or churches to thwart mass murder attempts?

Not needed, as legislation allowing it was passed last year, and entities have been acting on it. For example, one attendee described the Cathedral downtown regularly having a uniformed office attend services with full view of the weapon he has on his hip.

Q2. What's been done to reform the parole process, where some violent offenders have been let out early?

While formerly seven years was allowed for murderers to seek parole, that time has been amended first to 15 years and now to 30 years. Yet other violent offenders are occasionally let out after only serving seven years. There may have to be a Constitutional amendment in Georgia to change things more aggressively.

Q3. Can the legislature help correct some poor decisions by the state in allowing or fomenting college mergers and downsizing, e.g. Armstrong and Georgia Southern?

The Governor appoints the Board of Regents that makes those decisions, the legislature can only control issues involving bonding to build or reconstruct schools.

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