

22 January 2015

LWVAF, Report from the Capitol, Week 2

This week the General Assembly is in recess to have joint Appropriations Committees hearings on the budgets. The hearings can be accessed on line via www.legis.ga.gov. Tuesday, the state economist, the Office of Planning and Budget, and the educational agencies presented. Wednesday, the subcommittees met to take up the amended FY15 recommendations. Thursday, the governor spoke.

All committees have had chairs named and members appointed. The **House**, surprisingly, had very few changes, principally because the vacancy in Ways & Means was filled by a person who had not been a chair of a current committee, although he is long on experience in Ways & Means and in local government. So the 'musical chairs' which frequently results when there is an opening in one of the major committee leadership roles just didn't happen. The changes are:

- Ed Rynders will chair Government Affairs, replacing Amy Carter
- Amy Carter chairs Appropriations subcommittee for General Government, replacing Ed Rynders
- Stephen Allison will chair Special Rules, replacing Willie Talton who lost in the primary.
- Jay Powell will chair Ways & Means, replacing Mickey Channell who resigned for health reasons.

The **Senate** lost several leaders to retirement. Their positions were taken over by others and filling those positions caused vacancies in a lot of committee chairs. One can only have one leadership position at a time.

- Burt Jones will chair Banking & Financial Institutions, replacing John Crosby who retired.
- Dean Burke will chair Ethics, replacing Rick Jeffares who moved to Regulated Industries
- Fran Millar will chair Higher Education, replacing Bill Cowsert who became Majority Leader
- Charles Bethel will chair Insurance & Labor, replacing Tim Golden who retired.
- Donzella James will chair Interstate Cooperation, replacing Hardie Davis who is now mayor of Augusta
- Tyler Harper will chair Public Safety, replacing Buddy Carter who is now in Congress
- Mike Crane will chair Reapportionment & Redistricting, replacing Don Balfour who lost in the primary
- Rick Jeffares will chair Regulated Industries, replacing Jack Murphy who lost in the primary
- Chuck Hufstetler will chair Retirement, replacing Fran Millar who moved to Higher Education
- John Albers will chair State & Local Government, replacing William Ligon, now Majority Caucus chair
- Ed Harbison will chair State Institutions & Property, replacing John Albers who moved to SLGO
- Tommie Williams will chair Transportation, replacing Steve Gooch who is now Majority Whip
- Hunter Hill will chair Veterans, Military & Homeland Security, replacing Ed Harbison now at SI&P.

Now that committees have leaders and members, bills which have been referred to them can begin to be heard and considered for floor debate. This newsletter will follow that action and reflect it in newsletters to come. Incidentally, bills are reported in this newsletter when they have been introduced. Many bills were prefiled, but have not yet been introduced even if the media has made an issue of them. Medical marijuana is one of these.

Annually, the only bill required to be passed is the budget. There are two budgets each session, the 'big' budget for the fiscal year beginning the following July, and the 'little' (or amended, supplemental, or midyear) budget for the current year whose primary purpose is to fund increased enrollments in schools and to reconcile available revenues with needs. In FY15, the current fiscal year, K-12 school enrollments continue to increase, and that took the biggest hunk of available funds, \$126 million. The Department of Community Affairs got \$75 million, \$35 million of which is to provide grants to local school systems to upgrade their broadband capacity to 100 mbps up from 3 mbps currently provided, and \$20 million for economic incentive grants. Most items in agencies are not recommended for change.

The 'big' budget for FY16 which starts in July is in the enviable position of having excess revenues to distribute, \$924 million. However, state pension plans have increased employer premiums which are distributed to each agency and other interagency billings which must come off the top. While there was no general employee pay increase given, those employees on salary scales will get paid any training and experience they earned. Also, money has been set aside for each agency to pay employees merit stipends and to induce applicants to become employees. Agencies which get state funding on formula all had their numbers 'trued up', i.e. if counts go up, funding goes up, and if counts go down, so does funding.

One of the largest line items is \$280 million to K-12 education for local schools to fill the annual hole that ‘austerity cuts’ have put into the QBE budget since 2002. There remains a hole, but it will now be about \$470 million per year, rather than over \$1 Billion a year as in FY12, FY13, and FY14. To see each agency and the recommended changes to the budget, go to www.opb.ga.gov. Also doing a fine job of analysis is GA Budget and Policy Institute, www.gbpi.org.

Now the General Assembly gets a crack at these recommendations, and if past is prolog, there will be many changes made. One constraint is that the governor’s revenue estimates cannot be changed. Transportation wants up to \$1.5 Billion annually for road and bridge maintenance, but it is not in this budget. The governor is asking the legislature to find the source of that funding, which could well be a motor fuel tax increase which would not kick in until either the first of the next calendar year or the next fiscal year. Medicaid has a growing clientele and is in need of additional resources, even without expansion of the eligibility for its benefits. So also does mental health, the University system, the technical colleges, the K-12 schools, and the list goes on.

The General Assembly goes back into session on Monday, January 26 for legislative day 5.

The League of Women Voters of GA Legislative Day is Wednesday, Feb. 18. Come’on down!

NEW LEGISLATION

BUDGET

HB 75 Ralston – 7 H.Appropriations
The amended FY 15 budget.

HB 76 Ralston – 7 H.Appropriations
The FY 16 budget.

CHILDREN

SB 34 Kirk – 13 S.Judiciary
Provides immunity from liability for persons, not sex offenders who must register, entering a parked vehicle to remove a child. The person must believe the child is in danger, must first check all doors to see if any are unlocked, must contact 911 prior to or immediately after entering the vehicle, and must stay at the scene until released by local law enforcement.

EDUCATION

HB 16 Prince – 127 H.Education
High schools shall lose all state funding if they belong to an athletic association that sponsors interscholastic competitions which forbid students enrolled in magnet schools to participate on their home high school teams. ***These students are not enrolled in that home high school. The state funding is for the academic day, not the extracurricular day. It seems a strange consequence for actions in the interscholastic arena.***

ELECTIONS/ETHICS

SB 31 Orrock – 36 S.Ethics
Any government agency which collects name, address, birthdate, citizenship status and electronic signature shall send that data to the Secretary of State who will automatically register that person to vote. The person may cancel the registration.

SB 33 Fort – 39 S.Ethics
Allows for plurality vote results in any election and eliminates the runoff provision. Sets date for primary as 11 weeks prior to the election, about the third week in August.

GOVERNMENT - GENERAL

HR 3 Brooks – 55 H.Government Affairs
Expresses profound regret for Georgia’s role in slavery.

SB 15 James – 35 S.Insurance & Labor
Minimum wage raised to \$10.10/hour, currently \$5.15/hour, and shall be indexed to inflation annually beginning 1-1-16.

GOVERNMENT – COURTS AND CRIMES

SB 23 Butler – 55 S.Judiciary
News obtained by a reporter is to be privileged in any court proceeding unless: the party asserting the privilege is not a party to the issue or if the privilege has been waived; the news is material to a controlling issue not yet determined or cannot reasonably be gotten by other means; the value of the evidence outweighs the negative effect of the disclosure. A court can order the reporter to disclose the source to a judge under seal of a communication made to further a crime, fraud, or tort, or is material to an undetermined issue. The judge after examination may order further disclosure.

HB 33 Taylor – 79 H.Judiciary Non Civil
Creates offenses for which citizens can be charged for resisting, obstructing, hindering, or opposing a code enforcement officer. *Law enforcement officers, prison guards, correctional officers, probation and parole supervisors, and conservation rangers already are so protected.*

HR 56 Tanner – 9 H.Judiciary Non Civil
No-knock warrants cannot be issued unless: the law enforcement agency has written policies on the use of such warrants; the required usage is between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m. unless otherwise authorized by a judge; knocking and announcing one’s presence and purpose would pose a significant and imminent danger to human life or the existence of evidence.

HEALTH

SB 29 Albers – 56 S.Insurance & Labor
Firefighter occupational diseases shall include hypertension, heart disease, cancer, respiratory disease, AIDS, and hepatitis if contracted three or more years after a person becomes a firefighter and whose duties involve suppressing fires. These health diagnoses shall be a rebuttable presumption and will be treated as if the firefighter were injured on the job. If death occurs, it will be treated as killed in the line of duty.

REVENUE/TAXATION

SB 30 Henson – 41 S.Finance
Income tax returns to be prepared online by the Department of Revenue for taxpayers choosing to use Form 500-EZ. The taxpayer can then print out, sign, and return the form.

This report will be posted on the LWV-AtlantaFulton web site.

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