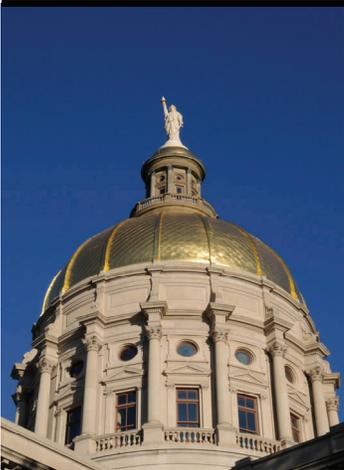


# Upper Chamber Report

Raegan Weber, Press Director  
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TOP STORY

## Transportation, Education, and Judicial Reform Take Center Stage in Chamber

By Ravae Graham

The State Senate today passed the most sweeping form of transportation legislation in Georgia's history. Authored by Senator Jeff Mullis (R-Chickamauga), the Transportation Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (TSPLOST) will fund much needed, long-term transportation infrastructure across the state, strengthening Georgia's competitive edge in a global economy. See the full story on page 3 of the Upper Chamber Report.

In efforts to prevent the loss of accreditation of any other county school sys-

tems, Sen. Gail Buckner (D-Morrow) compellingly addressed the Senate to garner support for her legislation concerning the code of ethics for local school boards. Senate Bill 36 requires local boards of education to adopt and annually review a code of ethics. She noted that 10

receive life imprisonment with the possibility of parole or the death penalty. SB 13 offers an alternative to those sentences by allowing life imprisonment without parole. Smith has received support for the bill from several prosecutors across the state.



**Inside this issue:**

Transportation, Education, and Judicial Reform Take Center in Chamber	1
Sen. Rogers Authors Homestead Exemption Amendment	2
Sen. Bulloch Proposes Crackdown on Food Testing	2
Georgia One Step Closer to Transportation Reform	3
In Committee News	4
Legislative Process Dates	5

to 15 percent of school boards are under accreditation review. Clayton County schools were the first in the nation in the past 40 years to lose accreditation, failing to meet eight of nine improvement mandates.

Legislation presented by Sen. Preston Smith (R-Rome) changing sentence options for those convicted of murder also overwhelmingly passed by a vote of 54 to 0. Currently in the state of Georgia, a person convicted of murder can re-

Firefighters participated in events at the Gold Dome to celebrate the 37<sup>th</sup> annual Firefighters' Recognition Day at the Capitol. To commemorate the special event, Sens. Bucker and Valencia Seay (D-Riverdale) presented firefighters from Clayton County with a resolution honoring their outstanding service and commitment. There are over 30,000 firefighters and 900 local fire departments in Georgia.

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## Senator Rogers Authors Homestead Exemption Amendment

By Raegan Weber

**ATLANTA** (February 3, 2009) – Senate Majority Leader Chip Rogers (R-Woodstock) has introduced a bill to amend the Homestead Exemption Act doubling state-wide homestead exemptions. This comes on the heels of Governor Perdue’s attempt to remove the Homeowner Tax Relief Grants (HTRG) for 2009.

“This bill creates a homeowner tax relief the taxpayer can rely on each year. Increasing the Homestead Exemption in lieu of a grant removes the state government as the middle man,” said Rogers. “The amount of the exemption has never changed since its inception in the 1930s. It has been unresponsive to the economic situations for far too long. Homeowners

deserve some relief.”

Specifically the bill will increase the amount of the state-wide homestead exemption from \$2000 to \$4000 with automatic future adjustments for inflation.

While the Senate and House are committed to funding HTRG in 2009, Rogers says that by doubling the Homestead Exemption homeowners would be protected from possible HTRG cuts in the future. Additionally, exemption funds would not be subject to appropriated funding decisions each year. The funds would be guaranteed to those it impacts most – the taxpayers.

Lt. Governor Casey Cagle recently commented on Senate Bill 83 saying, “The Senate has stood strong in our commitment to fight for lower prop-

erty taxes and not increase the burden on homeowners during this tough economic time. Our proposal to double the homestead exemption will provide necessary relief for homeowners across the state and is a step in the right direction. President Pro-Tem Tommie Williams and Majority Leader Chip Rogers have displayed solid leadership on this issue and we look forward to moving this legislation forward.”

The Homestead Exemption Act became State law in the 1930s under Governor Eugene Talmadge’s Administration. The tax exemption was proposed at \$2000 and has remained that amount ever since.

SB 83 goes before the Senate Finance Committee today and will likely go to the Senate Floor for a vote by the end of the week. For more information on SB 83, go to [www.legis.ga.gov](http://www.legis.ga.gov). □

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## Sen. Bulloch Proposes Crack- down on Food Testing

By Kallarin Richards

**ATLANTA** (February 3, 2009) — State Senator John Bulloch (R-Ochlocknee) is launching a bill to impose stricter guidelines on food testing for processing plants in response to the nationwide salmonella outbreak that was linked to a South Georgia peanut butter plant in Blakely, GA. Senate Bill 80, the Food Safety Testing, Reporting & Record Keeping bill, dropped this week.

“When people’s lives are at stake, food safety inspections should not be subject to lax regulations,” said Sen. Bulloch. “Consumers must be assured their food is safe and we must protect the integrity of Georgia’s producers. Much of our economy depends on the state’s agriculture industry, which cannot afford to suffer the negative impacts of food recalls.”

Sen. Bulloch’s legislation would re-

quire that food processing facilities report suspicions of contaminated food, food testing and retention of testing results to the Department of Agriculture (Department). This legislation would provide the Department free access to any food processor’s testing records for the presence of contaminants. The Commissioner of Agriculture is also directed to establish requirements for regular food testing on a yearly or more frequent basis.

The measure strengthens requirements for reporting contaminated products or the suspicions of contaminated products, requiring that a food processor report testing results by the next business day to the Department. This will ensure that any testing or suspicions are reported directly to the state. The bill gives the commissioner the right to test any food if there are reasonable grounds to suspect contamination. Financial responsibility for the cost of testing lies solely with the food establishment, not the department.

Despite misleading media reports, the peanuts in the contaminated peanut butter were not the cause of the outbreak. While Georgia peanuts remain a safe product, the state’s agriculture industry has already experienced a negative impact. The Federal government has launched a criminal investigation to determine if the plant knew about the contamination prior to releasing the product to the marketplace. Hearings begin this week in Washington, DC.

Georgia is the number one peanut producer in the nation. In 2008, peanut production in Georgia was 2.3 billion pounds, compared to the previous year’s 1.6 billion pounds according to the USDA National Agriculture Statistics Service. Georgia produces 45% of the United States’ peanuts. Georgia has 14,160 farms with peanuts and over 4,800 active farms. Georgia has approximately 250 peanut related businesses. The peanut industry contributes more than 50,000 jobs in Georgia. □

# Georgia One Step Closer to Transportation Reform

## Senate Passes TSPLOST Measure

By Kallarin Richards

ATLANTA (February 3, 2009) – The State Senate today passed the most sweeping form of transportation legislation in Georgia’s history. Authored by Senator Jeff Mullis (R-Chickamauga), the Transportation Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (TSPLOST) will fund much needed, long-term transportation infrastructure across the state, strengthening Georgia’s competitive edge in a global economy.



Reporters eagerly await Sen. Mullis’ remarks on passing TSPLOST

“The time is *now* to implement a true infrastructure stimulus. Traffic congestion stifles economic growth, hinders businesses, and costs jobs. Georgia cannot continue to suffer such losses in the current economic climate,” said Sen. Mullis. “Passing this bill now gives us the chance to educate the public on its benefits before they are faced with a vote on the November 2010 ballot.”

This voter-approved transportation funding enhancement will allow counties the option to band together to levy a one percent sales tax to fund transportation projects in their district. The bill creates only one defined region – 10 County ARC Region (Cherokee, Douglas, Fulton, Fayette, Clayton, Henry, Rockdale, DeKalb, Gwinnett, and Cobb). Other counties

around the state have the option to be individual regions or come together as larger regions with local approval. They may also opt not be a TSPLOST region at all. Offering a flexible solution to meet the diversity of needs across the state, the measure allows voters to

also decide what projects in their area need funding the most.

Lieutenant Governor Casey Cagle offered his support of the bill by saying, “Our statewide, regional approach is a flexible and optional solution for Georgia allowing for true local input and influence of transportation projects. Just as our state has many diverse transportation needs, a funding mechanism should respect the diverse regional needs.”

Many lawmakers are looking to transportation this session as a means of jump starting the economy. The TSPLOST will generate up to \$850 million in funding each year for the metro Atlanta

area, and up to \$1.2 billion for the entire state. Contributing to transportation infrastructure will produce jobs and a better economy, capitalizing on the relationship between transportation development and economic growth. Sen. Mullis noted that due to the severe traffic congestion, Georgia has already lost \$185 billion in infrastructure, along with several Fortune 500 companies.

There was a strong showing of bipartisan support for the measure as Senators from both sides of the aisle took the floor to urge passage of the bill. Senate Resolution 44, the Constitutional Amendment, and its enabling legislation Senate Bill 39 passed overwhelmingly, becoming the first major piece of legislation to pass through the Senate for the 2009 Legislative Session. The bill now moves to the House, where it will first be debated in committee.

“I look forward to working with my colleagues in the House to finally pass the transportation relief that we have been working on for the past three years,” Sen. Mullis added. “This is not a Republican or Democratic issue, this is a Georgia issue. There is not a single city or county in the state that does not need transportation improvements.”

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# In Committee News...

## Senate Public Safety Committee Recommends Pick-up Truck Seat Belt Enforcement Legislation

By Matt Colvin

ATLANTA (February 3, 2009) – The Senate Public Safety Committee favorably passed today a revised version of State Senator Don Thomas' (R-Dalton) legislation that would require enforcement of seat belt use in pick-up trucks. Sen. Thomas has worked tirelessly over the years on seeking passage of this legislation. As he testified before the committee, Georgia is now the only state that does not have a pick-up truck seat belt enforcement law in effect. The new bill, Senate Bill 5, would allow pick-up trucks that are regularly used on Georgia farms

not to be included in the requirement.

Representatives from the Governor's Office of Highway Safety, AAA, and Children's Healthcare of Atlanta all spoke briefly to the committee in support of SB 5 before it was unanimously passed out of committee.

Two other bills were favorably recommended by a unanimous vote. Senator Bill Jackson (R-Apppling) introduced to the committee SB 6, which would revise any penalties enforced on restricted licenses for truck drivers charged with a traffic violation. The bill would revoke the option to suspend the license and only allow for monetary fines to be imposed in hopes of not jeopardizing the driver's

employment status.

The committee also passed a bill sponsored by Sen. Seth Harp (R-Midland) that would allow agencies to help train police dogs by allowing them to maintain any unclaimed human cadavers for training purposes. SB 38 would give power to the Board for the Distribution of Cadavers to provide for dead bodies to be used in the training and handling of police canine, as currently the training agencies do not have permission to possess and maintain any cadavers. □



## Homeowner Tax Relief Grant Protection, Homestead Exemption Increases pass Senate Finance Committee

By Matt Colvin

ATLANTA (February 3, 2009) – The Senate Finance Committee today recommended two key pieces of legislation that would protect a promised property tax break for 2009 and double the current statewide homestead tax exemption from \$2000 to \$4000.

Representative Larry O'Neal (R-Warner Robins), chairman of the House Ways and Means committee, introduced House Bill 143 to the committee, which would ensure the Homeowner Tax Relief Grant (HTRG) would be part of the 2009 budget and change the manner and method for appropriating

the funds for future years. HB 143 would mandate the General assembly fund the HTRG for the 2009 amended budget, which currently is facing a \$428 million shortfall to provide the funding. The second part of the bill would allow the HTRG to be funded for future years only from a budget surplus. Rep. O'Neal stated that the General Assembly wants to fund this program, but needs to ensure it will be able to afford it in case of any future budget shortfalls. If the funding is available it will be allocated to the supplemental fiscal year budget with the appropriate rate change to reflect the consumer price index and inflation.

Senate Majority Leader Chip Rogers (R-Woodstock) introduced the committee substitute to Senate Bill 83, which would allow for a state-wide Home-

stead Tax Exemption Act increase from \$2000 to \$4000. Sen. Rogers presented to the committee statistics showing the current homestead exemption had been in place for over 70 years and taking inflation into account that \$2000 exemption in the 1930's would equate to approximately a \$32,000 exemption in today's economy. Sen. Rogers noted that the legislation includes an exemption amount increase on a year-to-year basis by a percentage equal to the cost-of-living index. The Act would be subject to voter approval, in which a special election is scheduled to be held in June 2009 to decide on the measure.

Both HB 143 and the SB 83 substitute passed unanimously from the committee and will await further action before going to the Senate floor for consideration. □

## Senate State Institutions & Property Committee Recommends State Detention Center Reform Bill

By Matt Colvin

ATLANTA (February 3, 2009) – A bill that will drastically increase the available space in the Department of Corrections (DOC) was unanimously passed out of the Senate State Institutions &

Property Committee today at the Capitol. Committee chairman Johnny Grant (R-Milledgeville) introduced Senate Bill 65 which would allow judges to require certain defendants sentenced to probation to complete a period of confinement in a probation detention center not to exceed 120 days. Representatives from the DOC testified to the committee that current occupants of detention centers are staying far longer

than 120 days and this bill would provide much more flexibility and space for detention center management. The DOC stated that currently they have over 500 persons on their detention center waiting list and this new legislation would equate to freeing up the space of six detention centers. The bill was unanimously passed out of committee and will await Senate action before going to a floor debate. □

# Legislative Process Dates

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## Important Dates in the Legislative Process

### Introduction - Last day to file and/or 1st Read in Senate.

**30<sup>th</sup> day** - last day to introduce General Senate bills and resolutions (even year). [Rule 3-1.2 (b)]

**30<sup>th</sup> day** - last day to accept General House bills and resolutions. [Rule 3-1.2 (b)]

**39<sup>th</sup> day** - last day to introduce General Senate bills and resolutions (odd year). [Rule 3-1.2 (b)]

*\*Note: Senate bills and resolutions must be filed with the Secretary before 4:00 p.m. to be 1st read on the next legislative day.*

## Deadlines for passage in current year

### Committee Report Deadlines - Last day to read report. Report submitted to Secretary by convening.

**28<sup>th</sup> day** - General Senate bills and resolutions.

**38<sup>th</sup> day** - Local Senate bills and resolutions.

**38<sup>th</sup> day** - General House bills and resolutions.

**40<sup>th</sup> day** - Local House bills and resolutions.

### Calendar Management

Calendar in numerical order after 2nd reading of legislation; days 1-5. [Rule 4-2.10 (a)]

Rules Committee sets the calendar for days 6 - 40. [Rule 4-2.10 (b)]

### General Senate Bills and Resolutions

**26<sup>th</sup> day** - File with Secretary of the Senate. [Rule 3-1.2 (a)]

**27<sup>th</sup> day** - 1st Reading and referral to committee. [Rule 3-1.2 (b)]

**28<sup>th</sup> day** - Committee report read upon convening. (A recommitted bill already 2nd read - report day 29.)

**29<sup>th</sup> day** - 2nd Reading. [Rule 4-2.6]

**30<sup>th</sup> day** - Passage [Rule 4-2.10 (a)] and immediate transmittal to House. [Rule 4-2.14]

### Local Senate Bills and Resolutions

**35<sup>th</sup> day** - File with Secretary of the Senate. [3-1.2 (a)]

**36<sup>th</sup> day** - 1st Reading and referral to committee. (Cannot pass for 2 days.) [Rule 4-2.4 (c) ]

**38<sup>th</sup> day** - Favorable report by committee, passage and immediate transmittal to the House. [Rule 4-2.14]

**39<sup>th</sup> day** - 2nd Reading in House.

**40<sup>th</sup> day** - Favorable report and passage in House.

### General House Bills and Resolutions

**30<sup>th</sup> day** - Transmitted from House and received by Secretary.

**31<sup>st</sup> day** - 1st Reading and referral to committee. [Rule 3-1.2 (b)]

**38<sup>th</sup> day** - Favorable report upon convening and 2nd reading. (Applies to days 36 - 38) [Rule 4-2.6]

**39<sup>th</sup> day** - Passage. [Rule 4-2.10 (a)]

**40<sup>th</sup> day** - Passage of bills or resolutions tabled day 39; removed from the table on day 40. [Rule 4-2.10 (a)]

### Local House Bills and Resolutions

**39<sup>th</sup> day** - 1<sup>st</sup> Reading and referral to committee.

**40<sup>th</sup> day** - Favorable report by committee and passage.

*\* Note: On the 30th day and on the last three days of session, bills and resolutions needing action from the House are automatically immediately transmitted. [Rule 4-2.14]*