

Homestead Exemption Passes Senate, Homeowner Tax Relief Grants to be Reconsidered Tuesday

Lawmakers Agree to Legislative Schedule through March, Adjourning to June

By Raegan Weber and Matt Colvin

ATLANTA (February 6, 2009) – A bill that will give Georgia homeowners a tax break by doubling the current homestead tax exemption passed the Senate this morning while a House bill that would guarantee property owners state tax relief will be reconsidered for a vote Tuesday. The Georgia State Senate met this morning for Legislative Day 15, which would serve as arguably the liveliest day of the 2009 session.

The Senate took up two property tax bills for votes, Senate Bill 83 which raised the current homestead tax

exemption from \$2,000 to \$4,000 and House Bill 143 which would fund the

83 to the floor, noting that the current homestead exemption has not been updated in over 70 years and that taxpayers should have the right to determine how much property taxes they should pay. Opponents to the bill noted that the increased tax exemption would take away



\$428 million Homeowner Tax Relief Grant for 2009. Lawmakers also adopted an adjournment resolution from the House detailing the legislative schedule for the rest of the 2009 General Assembly that would include a three month recess that would put the end of session in late June.

from local governments and limit their ability to operate their respective cities and counties. The bill passed with overwhelming support by a 40-14 vote and will now head to the House of Representatives for consideration. If passed, the measure will be voted on by citizens during a special election in June before becoming law.

Motions to engross both bills were brought to the floor with much debate, but both were ultimately engrossed so the bills came to a vote without amendments. Democratic leaders including Senators Robert Brown (D-Macon), David Adelman (D-Decatur), and Steve Thompson (D-Marietta) spoke out in disappointment over not being able to submit any changes to the legislation.

Senate President Pro Tempore Tommie Williams (R-Lyons) presented HB 143 as its Senate sponsor. He urged passage of this bill to honor the General Assembly's promise to maintain the Homeowner Tax Relief Grant in the 2009 budget. Additionally, the grants would be appropriated in future years only when there was a budget surplus. Opponents of the bill expressed their desire to pass a more permanent property

Senate Majority Leader Chip Rogers (R-Woodstock) presented SB

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Upper Chamber Report

Raegan Weber, Press Director
Kallarin Richards, Editor in Chief

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tax relief measure as well as to ensure the current bill was not conflicting with other statutes. Senate members passed HB 143 on the floor by a 29-24 majority vote followed by a motion for reconsideration. HB 143 will be reconsidered next Tuesday, February 10.

The Senate adopted House Resolution 238 which sets the legislative calendar through the end of March. HR 238 states that both the House and Senate will meet on a three day a week schedule beginning next week and complete its business by Day 35, scheduled for March 22.

The General Assembly will then adjourn and leave five legislative days that would only be used if needed depending on federal stimulus money and finalizing budget details. The General Assembly would reconvene Monday, June 22 for Day 36 to complete the 2009 session or come back and adjourn *sine die* if no more legislative days are needed.

On Thursday, the Senate passed two bills during Chamber. SB 8 allows students to self administer epinephrine. This life-saving measure permits local boards of education to adopt a policy that will allow students to carry self-administered injectable epinephrine to treat allergic

reactions. Epinephrine is the first drug that should be used in the emergency of a child having a potential life-threatening allergic reaction. Common examples of potentially life threatening allergies are those to foods, such as peanuts, eggs, and shellfish, and stinging insects such as bees, wasps, and fire ants. SB 43 amends the Boll Weevil Eradication Act to adjust the requirements for suppression and eradication programs to include cotton handlers, in addition to cotton farmers. It also addresses updated rules for fines.

The Senate will be adjourned until Tuesday, February 10 for Legislative Day 16. □

Senate Makes Historic Vote to Double Statewide Homestead Exemption

By Raegan Weber

ATLANTA (February 6, 2009) – The Georgia State Senate today voted historically to double the statewide homestead exemption. Senate Bill 83 overwhelmingly passed out of the Senate by a 40-14 vote and will now go to the House.

Senate Majority Leader Chip Rogers (R-Woodstock) introduced the bill that will amend the Homestead Exemption Act to increase the exemption from \$2,000 to \$4,000 with automatic future adjustments for inflation.

“This is crystal-clear legislation that is the proper way to deliver property tax relief to homeowners,” said Rogers. “Overall, this coupled with the tax assessment caps will impact those who need it the most - taxpayers.”

The Homestead Exemption Act became State law in the 1930s under

Governor Eugene Talmadge’s Administration. The tax exemption was proposed at \$2,000 and has remained that amount ever since. If the measure passes in the House, it will go on the special-election ballot in June for voters to make the final decision.

“Today we sent a strong message to over three million homeowners throughout Georgia: the Senate will remain steadfast in our commitment to keep property taxes low during this tough economic time,” said Lt. Governor Casey Cagle. “The fact is, in the time that we have seen thirteen U.S. Presidents sworn into office, the homestead exemption has not increased. Increasing the exemption is not only long overdue, but it is the right thing to do for homeowners who are wading through this economic downturn.”

Rogers also supports House Resolution 1 to help protect Georgia property owners from unfair property assessment increases. Senator Rogers authored similar legislation, Senate

Resolution 796, which provides tax relief for homeowners through a constitutional amendment to cap property tax assessments. Residential property assessed value may not increase anymore than two percent a year and non-residential property assessed value may not increase anymore than three percent a year or the rate of inflation, whichever is lower. In addition, it allows property to be assessed at a real, fair market value and will establish accountability for the property tax system. The resolution passed the State Senate in 2008.



Rogers passionately urged his colleagues to vote for the amendment stating, “If we can ask voters for a penny tax increase in a special election, then we can certainly ask voters if they’d like to lower

their property tax liability in a special election. This is legislation truly acting in voters’ best interests.”

For more information on SB 83, go to www.legis.ga.gov. □

Sen. Mullis Continues Quest to Solve Georgia's Transportation Woes

By Raegan Weber

ATLANTA (February 6, 2009) – State Senator Jeff Mullis (R-Chickamauga) is leading the way for Georgia to establish a state-of-the-art, magnetic levitation rail system connecting Chattanooga to Atlanta.

Sen. Mullis offered “Plain Train” legislation this week through Senate Resolution 117 which supports the creation of a magnetic levitating, or maglev, train connecting Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport in Atlanta to the Chattanooga Municipal Airport. If passed, this would be the first maglev of its kind in the United States and second in the World.

“Creating the Plain Train would make Georgia a world-wide leader in transportation innovation,” said Mullis. “This would alleviate many of the mass transportation issues between Chattanooga and Atlanta, while also improving regional and local economies.”

A maglev train is a form of transportation that levitates, guides, and propels vehicles using electromagnetic force. This method of transportation is much faster, safer and cleaner than wheeled mass transit systems, potentially reaching velocities comparable to turboprop and jet aircraft.

China has had its own maglev transit since 2000, called the

Shanghai Maglev Train. The Shanghai Transrapid Maglev Line is the world's first high-speed commercial commuter system, which can reach speeds of up to 300 miles per hour using state-of-the-art electromagnetic levitation technology. Sen. Mullis' resolution seeks to establish this same state-of-the-art technology in Georgia. The resolution passed with an

overwhelming majority in committee this week.

“A Maglev high-speed connection between Chattanooga and Atlanta would be beneficial for both communities as it would increase economic development, bring more people to the underutilized Chattanooga airport and relieve congestion at Atlanta's busy airport. Regional infrastructure investment is an important component for getting federal support for Maglev,” said U.S. Congressman Zach Wamp (R-Tenn.). “This could be a national model for other cities to help alleviate overcrowding in land-locked areas. An Atlanta-Chattanooga link could ultimately take high-speed rail through Nashville to Chicago and open up a

South to Midwest route for an intermodal mass transit system to grow the U.S. economy and help our nation be more competitive.”

Hartsfield-Jackson International



Airport is the world's busiest airport, serving 250,000 passengers daily. It provides Georgia with \$53.6 billion in total economic impact a year. While 80 percent of the U.S. population is within a two-hour flight from Atlanta, many residents in north Georgia and visitors to the state say traffic is too congested and that it often delays safe travel to the airport. Sen. Mullis has noted that constructing a high speed train will be much cheaper than building a new airport to serve the state's northern region.

For more information on Senate Resolution 117, please visit www.senate.ga.gov.

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Sen. Renee Unterman Leading Charge in General Assembly to Fight Prostitution of Children

By Matt Colvin

ATLANTA (February 5, 2009) — State Senator Renee Unterman (R-Buford) continued her efforts to fight the sexual exploitation of minors in Georgia as she held a press conference today at the State Capitol endorsing a legislative package aimed at cracking down on this practice. Sen. Unterman, who co-chaired the joint Commission on Sexual Exploitation of Minors this past summer, is the primary sponsor of two bills in the package which she sees as vital measures to protect the safety of young boys and girls and to create a no tolerance zone for the prostitution of children in Georgia.

“I am committed to doing all I can to stop the horrible victimization of young boys and girls in Georgia and this legislation will protect innocent children and teens from abuse and provide the resources necessary to combat these crimes much more effectively,” said Unterman. “This legislative package is designed as a targeted effort to help create a coordinated, statewide campaign that will raise awareness and stop the prostitution of children in Georgia, so it is imperative we act now to address these horrendous crimes taking place all over our state and protect these young victims from future

abuse.”

Sen. Unterman seeks to amend the child abuse reporting law to require mandatory reporting of all commercial sexual exploited minors as child sexual abuse through Senate Bill 69. The current law only mandates a report of sexual abuse by a parent or caretaker, but the study committee findings noted that many adolescent girls are solicited by non-family members. Sen. Unterman also will carry the issue of changing the minimum age of exotic dancers from 18 to 21 with SB 74. SB 74 also raises the required age of any employee such as a waiter or bartender working in a Georgia adult entertainment facility to 21.

Sen. Jack Murphy (R-Cumming) has introduced SB 91, the adult entertainment surcharge bill, as part of this legislative package. The proposed measure would impose a \$5 entry fee for patrons at adult entertainment businesses and venues. The money generated from the surcharge will be spent to fund services for children who have been prostituted, including abuse centers and prevention strategies. Unlike taxes which generate revenue for the state general fund and can be spent on any project, this surcharge fee will go directly to the Crime Victims’ Emergency Fund, which is administered by the Criminal Justice Coordinating

Council (CJCC).

Sen. Unterman was joined today by several students of TeenPact, which is a Christian leadership school geared towards teaching children ages 13-18 principles in leadership, politics, and citizenship. TeenPact holds classes at the state Capitol studying the legislative process. Other supporters who attended were State Senator David Shafer (R-Duluth), Jim Beck of the Georgia Christian Coalition, and Cheryl Deluca-Johnson of Street GRACE.

Advocates for the bills have noted Minor Sexual Exploitation is an imperative and prevalent issue to Georgians because Atlanta is one of 14 cities in the U.S with the highest incidents of child exploitation. Two hundred to three hundred young girls are sexually exploited in Georgia every month with as many as 129 girls being prostituted on a typical weekend night, and 12 to 14 is the average age of entry into pornography and prostitution in the U.S.

SB 69 and 74 have been referred to the Senate Judiciary Committee while SB 91 has been assigned to the Senate Finance Committee. Each bill will be taken up for debate and consideration at a future committee meeting yet to be determined.

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Senate Finance Committee Recommends Changes to Ad Valorem Property Tax Assessment

By Matt Colvin

ATLANTA (February 5, 2009) – The Senate Finance Committee met for the second time this week and resumed testimony on Senate Bill 55, legisla-

tion that would amend the definitions related to the Ad Valorem Taxation of Property. The proposed bill would require foreclosure of bank-owned sales of comparable real property to be factored in Ad Valorem tax assessment of property when determining fair market value. The bill’s sponsor, Senator Chip Pearson (R- Dawsonville), presented a substitute to the

committee that would expand the proposed requirement to also include the value as declared on the real estate transfer tax declaration and any value resulting from land conversion easement. The committee unanimously passed the substitute to SB 55 and it will now head to the Senate Rules Committee before consideration on the Senate floor.

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Legislative Process Dates

Important Dates in the Legislative Process

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

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

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

39th 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.

28th day - General Senate bills and resolutions.

38th day - Local Senate bills and resolutions.

38th day - General House bills and resolutions.

40th 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

26th day - File with Secretary of the Senate. [Rule 3-1.2 (a)]

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

28th day - Committee report read upon convening. (A recommitted bill already 2nd read - report day 29.)

29th day - 2nd Reading. [Rule 4-2.6]

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

Local Senate Bills and Resolutions

35th day - File with Secretary of the Senate. [3-1.2 (a)]

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

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

39th day - 2nd Reading in House.

40th day - Favorable report and passage in House.

General House Bills and Resolutions

30th day - Transmitted from House and received by Secretary.

31st day - 1st Reading and referral to committee. [Rule 3-1.2 (b)]

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

39th day - Passage. [Rule 4-2.10 (a)]

40th 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

39th day - 1st Reading and referral to committee.

40th 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]*