

Senators Begin Filing Key Bills

By Kallarin Richards

The Senate reconvened for the first time Monday since its recess for budget hearings and in honor of the

year-old Lawrence Manker Jr. worked at the refinery and was a student at Savannah State at the time of the explosion, and suffered



Savannah refinery explosion survivor Manker and his doctor, Fred Mullins, receive a standing ovation from the Senate.

burns to over 85 percent of his body. Sen. Staton noted that this young man's survival is a testament to the need for every citizen across the state to quickly access a

nearby trauma center.

presidential inauguration. Senator Cecil Staton was the first lawmaker to take the well on a Point of Personal Privilege, where he again stressed the need for funding for a statewide trauma care system. He delivered a powerful message by introducing a young man who was a victim of the sugar refinery explosion in Savannah last year. 20-

Sen. Valencia Seay then offered her congratulations to President Barack Obama on his first week in office, and Sen. Seth Harp introduced his bill to ensure the legitimacy of television ads for lawyers.

Several key bills were also filed on Monday that are expected to create some controversy during the course of session, including Sen. Don Balfour's bill to change the rate applied to energy customers to finance the building of a nuclear power plant. This will save customers from paying even greater inflated prices in the future.

Sen. Jeff Mullis filed his legislation allowing voters to decide if they want to levy a one percent sales tax to fund transportation projects in their region. Sen. Mullis has said this would raise \$850 million a year for Metro Atlanta, which would consist of a combined region of 10 counties. A wide range of projects could be funded under this tax, including roads, bridges and rail. Sen. Mullis has also said that a high speed train from Atlanta to Chattanooga could be funded through the tax, which would be cheaper than building another airport to serve North Georgia. While it will take several significant steps to solve the transportation problem, the voter-approved local sales tax concept has been successful in the past and will provide meaningful funding.

Finally, in an effort to better manage the Georgia Public Defender Standards Council, Sen. Preston Smith is proposing to place all authority with the director, and make the board an advisory body. Under the legislation, the council would also be renamed the Georgia Public Defender Agency. The cash-strapped system is in need of greater streamlined management, as it already struggles to pay council members who often work without pay.

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Upper Chamber Report

JANUARY 27, 2009 — DAY 7

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State Ag and Rural Leaders Gather for the 8th Annual Meeting

ATLANTA (January 26, 2009)—Senator Bill Heath (R- Bremen) joined over 135 agriculture legislators at the 8th Annual Legislative Ag Chairs Meeting in San Diego, CA from Jan 23-25, 2009. Sen. Heath has recently been honored with his election to vice-president of this organization. The invitation only event is the premier opportunity for agriculture legislators from around the US, Canada, and Mexico to meet and discuss the challenges and opportunities facing agriculture.

Attendees toured California avocado and flower farms on Friday, spent all day Saturday in workshops and concluded Sunday with an overview of federal issues and implementation issues for the 2008 Farm Bill. The meeting topics are developed by the Advisory Board and provide a broad opportunity to learn, discuss and share up to the minute information on issues facing farmers, ranchers and their legislators every day.

Highlights this year included:

- Educating Consumers: Ag's Future Depends on it.
- Organic Farming, Genetics and the Future of Food
- Family Farm Viability
- Ag Competitiveness: What are the Major Issues Facing Agriculture
- Innovative Rural Health Care Options
- Sustainable Biofuels
- Immigration and Ag Labor

“The National Ag Chairs Summit is the most important meeting of the year for me,” said Sen. Heath. “It is a unique opportunity to learn about ag issues in other parts of the country and hear from the top experts in the field. I always go home after this meeting knowing that I will be able to put this information to good use, serving my constituents and my state.”

National Ag Chairs Summit is sponsored by State Ag and Rural Leaders (SARL) with support from the Council of the State Governments (CSG), National Conference of State Legislators (NCSL) and Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI). □

Sen. Douglas Appointed to Lead NCSL Military Task Force

ATLANTA— (January 26, 2009) State Sen. John Douglas (R-Social Circle) has recently been appointed co-chairman to the newly-formed National Conference of State Legislators (NCSL) Military Sustainability Task Force. The purpose of the new task force is to examine and assist in military-community relations and create policy to improve the health and well-being of veterans.

“I am overwhelmed at the support I've received from my fellow elected officials around the country,” Sen. Douglas, who is chairman of the Senate Veterans, Military and Homeland Security Committee, said. “I am honored to lead this task force to ensure the needs of our country's veterans are met.”

As co-chair of the Task Force with Texas State Sen. Leticia Van De Putte (D-Austin), Douglas will meet with his colleagues to cover issues such as: development near military installations; military-community partnerships to respond to mission change; veteran hiring and procurement preferences; mental health, substance abuse and family relationships facing returning veterans; and benefits for military personnel, veterans and their dependents. Members of the Task-Force will meet in conjunction with scheduled NCSL meetings and are expected to serve for two years.

Before his election to the Georgia Senate in 2004, Douglas served in the U.S. Army from 1977-1994. He also currently serves as a field representative of the Peace Officers Association of Georgia and is an active member in the Newton County GOP and American Legion Post 32.

“As a veteran, I have an active interest in the welfare of our country's service men and women and their families,” Sen. Douglas added.

The National Conference of State Legislators is a bipartisan organization that serves the legislators and staffs of the nation's 50 states, its commonwealths and territories. NCSL provides research, technical assistance and opportunities for policymakers to exchange ideas on the most pressing state issues. The Conference is an effective and respected advocate for the interests of state governments before Congress and federal agencies. □

Shafer's Waste Reduction Act passed out of Senate Appropriations Committee

Senate Bill 1 Would put Georgia State Government on a Zero Based Budget

ATLANTA (January 26, 2009) – Senator David Shafer (R-Duluth) today presented Senate Bill 1, the “Waste Reduction Act,” which will implement a system of zero-based budgeting for state government.

“The fundamental problem with Georgia's budget process is that rather than starting from zero, it begins with the assumption that all current state spending should automatically be carried over,” said Shafer. “The General Assembly spends the entire session debating how much extra to spend in the upcoming year

and not looking at programs that were approved years or decades earlier.”

Georgia currently prepares its budget on a “continuation” basis, which assumes that all current spending will be carried forward, and legislators only examine proposed increases. Shafer's legislation would require that one-fourth of the budget be zero based each year, so that over a four year term, the entire budget is scrutinized by the General Assembly.

“If we are serious about cutting the waste in state government, we need

to adopt a budget process that allows us to do so, and 'zero-based budgeting' is a common sense first step,” Shafer added.

Since his election in 2002, Shafer has introduced a similar bill every term. In 2008, both the Senate and House passed Shafer's bill but the session ended before minor differences between the the Senate and House versions could be reconciled. Shafer has developed a reputation as a budget reformer who strongly opposes tax increases. □

Transportation Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax—Snapshot

Bill Summary:

A flexible and optional solution that respects the diverse transportation needs of our whole state.

Projects are all roads, bridges, freight and passenger rail, airports, public transit, buses, seaports and O&M. No project shall be included if it is inconsistent with any statewide strategic transportation plan created by the General Assembly.

- Creates only one defined region – 10 County ARC Region (Cherokee, Douglas, Fulton, Fayette, Clayton, Henry, Rockdale, DeKalb, Gwinnett, Cobb).
- The rest of the state can either go as a single county (with agreement by cities), join together voluntarily in two or more counties or join in with the ARC district if they are a bordering county.
- For ARC region, governing authority is vested in the elected members of the ARC board. For other regions, it is the county commission chair and one mayor from a city in each county.
- Each district shall select one or more transportation agencies to assist with designing, planning and constructing projects (doesn't have to be GDOT).
- **Process:**
 - o District comes up with project list, amount of tax (can be up to 1%) and duration.
 - o Counties have 45 days to opt out by majority vote of county commissioners as well as majority of members of municipal authorities for cities representing more than 50% of municipal population.
 - o If counties opt out, remaining counties have additional 30 days to decide if they want to opt out.
 - o Counties that remain are considered the transportation district. The remaining district board will revise the project list according to who dropped out and who remained. The board will then vote to submit the resolution to the voters of the district.
 - o Vote shall be held in the next election available for splost elections. Referendum passes on majority vote of the region. If the question is not approved, the district may resubmit the question, or revise the project list.

Proceeds of the tax will go into a trust fund maintained by the transportation agency to be expended only for projects that have been approved by the voters.

- **Exemptions:** Off road diesel, Motor fuel, Property used in production of energy, Sale of energy used for manufacturing , All other current sales tax exemptions in state law, except that the tax shall be levied on food and beverages. \$5000 cap

Constitutional Amendment question:

Shall the Constitution of Georgia be amended so as to allow a regional local option sales tax of up to 1 percent to be used to fund transportation projects within the region from which the funds are collected?

Transportation Facts and Figures:

- Atlanta is the #2 most congested city in the United States of America
- We have lost Fortune 500 companies in Georgia because of the congestion issue
- There is over \$185 Billion (with a **B**) dollars of private investment waiting to be used for public transportation. Georgia should not be left behind while other states move ahead.
- Our bill would generate up to \$850 million in funding each year for the metro area and up to \$1.2 billion for the entire state. □

Please note that the 2009 Legislative Process Dates will be included in future reports upon finalization.