

Weekly Report

Week of February 15-19: Day 15-20

In the Chamber...

The Senate passed the FY10 amended budget 44 to 6. In maintaining focus on budget issues, the Senate also voted in favor of a two week recess to work on the FY11 budget. This important step will give senators time to address the current economic condition of the state.

Senators rallied behind Sen. Chip Rogers' (R - Woodstock) State Properties Commission Bill and Resolution. SB 254 and SR 510 work hand in hand to allow the General Assembly in general law to authorize the State Properties Commission (SPC), the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia, or both to enter into multi-year rental agreements. SB 254 will specifically provide direction to the SPC regarding multi-year contracts. This bill amends Title 50, Chapter 16 relating to the powers and duties of the SPC. SB 254 has an effective date of January 1, 2011; however the Act will only become effective on that date upon the November 2010 ratification of the Constitutional Amendment proposed by SR 510. The Resolution must achieve a two-thirds majority in the Senate and House, then be signed by the governor before going on the November ballot for a vote.

After much debate on the Senate Floor, a bill that increases transparency when health insurance companies utilize rental networks passed by a wide margin of 51-1. Throughout the state there are many companies that accumulate a network of medical providers and contract their services to health insurance companies. Insurers that use these rental networks can reimburse doctors for less than the rate agreed upon by the doctor and the original insurance company. Senate Bill 50, authored by Sen. Ralph Hudgens (R-Hull), chairman of the Insurance and Labor Committee, requires that health insurance companies disclose when they use a rental network. Two amendments were attached to the bill that increases penalties for companies that violate the terms of the bill, and another that gives doctors the right to a civil cause of action should such practices continue.

Sen. Steve Thompson (D-Marietta) took the well in support of the legislation, citing the need to hold health insurance companies accountable for their actions. He reiterated that the bill aims to encourage transparency, and that as lawmakers it is their responsibility to provide Georgia citizens with laws that are transparent.

Sen. Seth Harp (R-Midland) spoke in favor of SB 50, agreeing that the larger issue of the bill is transparency. He noted the health insurance industry has literally been taking money out of the pockets of hard working physicians for profit by reimbursing less. Furthermore, the discounted rates have perpetuated the cycle of good doctors going out of business.

Freshman Sen. Buddy Carter (R-Pooler) was treated to the Senate's traditional initiation of a steady stream of light-heartedly tough questions for new senators when they introduce a bill on

the floor for the first time. Senate Bill 353 is an annual update on dangerous medicinal drugs, which received a unanimous vote of 50-0 but not before several senators took their shot at Carter by asking him to pronounce several of the drugs listed in the bill.



Sen. Buddy Carter presents his first bill to the Senate.

State Sen. Chip Pearson (R- Dawsonville) sponsored a bill creating the Legislative Economic Development Council, which will evaluate the state's overall economic development strategy and review all state funded activities and expenditures that go into implementing the strategy (SB 374). The council will ensure money is spent appropriately and better facilitated in other areas. Duties of the council include reviewing the state's goals regarding economic development, job creation and business formation; reviewing periodically current tax exemptions and credits; and analyzing proposals and making recommendations to appropriate legislative committees for action.

The council will be co-chaired by the lieutenant governor and the speaker of the House, and will consist of 12 Senate and House members. Also, the council may appoint a citizen advisory committee to be made up of business and industry leaders to provide input and guidance to the council.

The Georgia Department of Economic Development must prepare an annual report detailing the state's programs and activities related to job creation and economic development in Georgia. This will list the tools and incentives that Georgia uses to grow jobs and recruit and retain business. With respect to tax credits, the reports must detail how much for each credit was used and how many jobs were created as a result of the credit. The bill passed with unanimous support.

Other orders of business included the Pre-Owned Manufactured Homes Inspection Bill (SB 384) from Sen. John Bulloch (R-Ochlocknee). What seemed to Sen. Bulloch to be a straightforward bill commanded a lot of time and attention, as well as a proposed amendment from Sen. Bill Heath (R- Bremen). The bill would give the fire safety commissioner the right to establish rules and regulations for an inspection program for pre-owned manufactured homes. Bulloch likened the law to used car inspections and noted that every buyer had the right to know the quality of the manufactured home they were buying. Sen. Heath's proposed amendment to the bill denied the county or state from prohibiting the property owner from living in his/her home. Heath

believes that no government should stop any property owner from living in their own space regardless of the condition. While the proposed amendment failed, the bill passed 39 to 14.

There were several bills on the floor that garnered great support from both sides of the aisle. Senators unanimously voted to pass SB 316, sponsored by Sen. Don Thomas (R-Dalton), which will help dialysis patients in Georgia supplement their high medical costs with secondary insurance through Medicare. This bill will require insurers offering Medicare supplement policies to those under the age of 65 to offer the same policies to eligible citizens enrolled in Medicare for disability or end-stage renal disease regardless of age. This improved access to supplemental policies, commonly referred to as Medigap insurance, breaks down certain obstacles created by the overwhelming cost of health care. Currently, there are approximately 2,000 Georgians who stand to benefit from this new piece of legislation. Sen. Donzella James (D-College Park) also spoke in support of the bill, sharing personal stories of family members affected by renal disease.

In an effort to prevent price gouging in a state of emergency, Sen. Jeff Mullis (R-Chickamauga) presented SB 237, which gives the government the right to intervene. The bill passed 50-2.

Senate Bill 341 also received a unanimous vote of 51-0, which was sponsored by Sen. Harp and requires that an individual be a legal resident of Georgia to be eligible to receive a HOPE GED voucher.

Sen. John Wiles' (R-Kennesaw) bill (SB 138) that requires legislation to specifically state when a citizen has the right to a civil cause of action was passed by a vote of 45-3.

Sen. Mitch Seabaugh's (R-Sharpsburg) Utility Contractor's Bill also passed, which clarifies that licensed utility contractors are eligible to bid on jobs for utility systems (SB 339). The legislation makes it unlawful for anyone with a valid utility contractor's license to be refused work on the basis that the contractor does not hold a residential or general contractor license. The bill passed without opposition.

Sen. David Shafer (R-Duluth) presented his bill that requires a periodic review of state licensing boards to ensure its necessity in the current business climate (SB 148). At least once every seven years, the existing regulatory entities board must make sure the report meets public interest. If the council concludes regulatory changes are necessary, a report will be issued recommending the changes about that regulatory entity. The head of any regulatory entity will have the right to appear before the council to contribute suggestions regarding potential changes to that respective entity.

Other bills that saw little to no resistance on the floor included SB 367, 355, and 371. Sen. Don Balfour's (R-Snellville) Influenza Bill (SB 367) revises the definition of "influenza vaccine". SB 355, sponsored by Sen. Ed Harbison (D-Columbus), allows members of the military to authorize an individual to have control over their disposition should they be killed in action. SB 371 by Sen. Bill Cowsert (R-Athens) authorizes the Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI) to investigate residential mortgage fraud cases. In addition, the GBI will be authorized to issue subpoenas, with the consent of the Attorney General, to compel production of any tangible

evidence relating to an alleged fraudulent real estate transaction.

The Senate also honored Gen. Larry Platt with a resolution from Sen. Vincent Fort (D-Atlanta). While he achieved notoriety on “American Idol” for his performance of “Pants on the Ground”, he has also been a dedicated member of the Civil Rights Movement since the 1950’s. Sen. Fort commented that Platt has been a “life long defender of equality on the front lines of social justice.”



General Larry Platt speaks to Senate

Committee News

Special Judiciary

The State Senate Special Judiciary Committee, chaired by Sen. John Wiles (R-Kennesaw), met to discuss Sen. Mitch Seabaugh’s (R-Sharpshurg) Common Sense Lawful Carry Legislation (Senate Bill 308). Seabaugh’s goal is to clarify confusion in the current law and bring continuity to the licensing and regulation of weapons permits.

SB 308 removes the public gathering clause out of the current law, which is the cause of great confusion for lawfully carrying Georgians as well as law enforcement. The bill gives private property owners the right to determine if they would like weapons on their premises. In addition, the bill aims to bring the licensing and regulation system under the Secretary of State’s office, so each of Georgia’s 159 counties will have the same standards. The amendment maintains all background checks currently in place.

The greatest concerns of the bill focused on carrying weapons in churches and on college campuses. Some fear that allowing firearms in these areas would only encourage acts of violence. Seabaugh reminded the committee that if somebody wants to commit random acts of violence, they will do so regardless of the law. He also noted that weapons would not be allowed everywhere on campuses and only by those who are over 21 and lawfully permitted to carry.

The bill was held over in committee for further deliberation and any additional changes.

Public Safety

An amended substitute for Senate Bill 291, sponsored by Sen. David Shafer (R - Duluth), passed

out the Public Safety Committee. Shafer introduced SB 291 on the last day of the 2009 Legislative Session. The bill provides that weapons license holders receive at least 90 days notice that their license be renewed. In addition, Shafer made updates to licensing ineligibility and clearer guidelines for noncitizen renewals. The substitute was amended to exclude Section 2, which made it legal for individuals to carry firearms in their vehicle while picking up or dropping off passengers at the airport. Sen. Valencia Seay (D- Riverdale) was the lone dissenting vote as the bill was sent on to the Rules Committee. Representatives from the NRA, Lobbyists for Life and Liberty, as well as the Georgia Sheriff's Association were present to speak in support of the bill.

A bill to strengthen law enforcement agencies' ability to hire and retain quality peace officers passed overwhelmingly out of the Senate Public Safety Committee Wednesday. Senate Bill 373, sponsored by Sen. Johnny Grant (R-Milledgeville), would require an employer to disclose employment-related information to an investigating law enforcement agency when a search is being conducted on hiring or certifying a police officer. Several police chiefs and sheriffs joined with Grant in support of the bill, and a top labor law expert testified that this bill would not violate any federal or state privacy rights granted to an employee. The committee unanimously passed a substitute to the bill which included several language re-writes.

Two additional bills were heard by the committee but were held for a full vote until a later date. Sen. Mitch Seabaugh (R-Sharpsburg) presented SB 295, which will crack down on police attempting to raise municipal and county revenue with excessive speeding fines for violations less than 17 miles per hour over the limit. The bill would require law enforcement agencies to annually submit reports to the Department of Community Affairs (DCA) detailing their collected fines from speeding violations from tickets less than 17 mph over the speed limit. The bill would allow DCA to withhold any state funds for one year to agencies who have had their speed detection device permits revoked or suspended for running excessive radar on roads and highways in their jurisdiction. If passed, the bill would lower the current 40 percent cap of speeding fines in any agency's budget to 35 percent. Committee members heard from police and highway safety officials as they voiced their concerns about the bill's negative affect on public safety with the lower percentage in budget totals and a possible increase in speeding violations. Chairman Jack Murphy (R-Cumming) decided to postpone voting to allow Seabaugh and public safety officials time to find common ground on the bill.

Finally, a resolution (SR 570) by Sen. Nan Orrock (D-Atlanta) urging the U.S. Congress to work on comprehensive immigration reform was ultimately held for a vote after a 3 to 3 stalemate. Concerns over specific language in the bill caused the vote split between members and it was decided that the resolution would be held until the next meeting for a full committee vote.

Education and Youth

The Senate Education and Youth Committee passed several bills to give school systems more flexibility in light of recent budget cuts. House Bill 906, sponsored by Rep. Jay Neal (R-Lafayette), allows schools an additional 30 days to offer an employment contract to employees. Rep. Neal explained this is significant because schools will now be able to make decisions based on concrete budget numbers. Previously, decisions were based on outlook figures. This bill mandates the extended deadline is only in effect until the 2012-2013 school year.

The committee also discussed HB 907, authored by Rep. David Casas (R-Lilburn). Currently, middle school programs only receive funding if grades six, seven and eight are housed in the same facility. HB 907 ensures middle schools receive funding provided the school is organized into some combination of the three grades. The bill passed unanimously.

Rep. Tom Dickinson (R-Cohutta) introduced HB 905 to extend the sunset date for low-wealth capital outlay grants. It received unanimous consent.

Sen. Dan Weber (R-Dunwoody) is carrying Senate Bill 387 which directs the Student Finance Commission to provide web based counseling, career tools and a graduation plan to assist with the transition to secondary school or the workforce. A website is already in place but this bill codifies it so that extra funding will be attainable. SB 387 also received unanimous passage.

The Senate Education and Youth Committee also voted to give military families and foster care children greater choice in education. Georgia taxpayers already provide school choice to special needs students, prekindergarten students and college students through the HOPE scholarship. Sen. Chip Rogers (R-Woodstock), sponsor of Senate Bill 361, explained that these military families and foster care children will now have the opportunity to take the state's education money allotted for that student and use it for a public or private school of the parent's choice.

The list of witnesses was long and varying in support of the bill. Two military wives came forward and expressed their support for the legislation. They explained that they do not choose where they are stationed so having a choice in where their child is being educated would be very helpful. One of these moms read a letter from her husband, an active military soldier now in Afghanistan, to the committee explaining why this is so important to military families and asking for the committee's support.

Several educators testified with mixed views. Some thought they would be able to reach more students with this expanded eligibility into the program while others feared the slippery slope of funneling public dollars to private schools.

Sens. Vincent Fort (D-Atlanta) and Donzella James (D-College Park) were very concerned with discrimination becoming a consequence of SB 361. Sen. Fort offered an amendment to ensure no school would be able to discriminate based on religion. Sen. James asked a series of questions targeting the financial accountability of private schools taking public dollars and whether this measure would be just another tier of government.

There were a number of witnesses from religious sects that supported the bill including a representative from the Catholic archdiocese and a rabbi.

Transportation

The State Senate Transportation Committee, chaired by Sen. Jeff Mullis (R-Chickamauga), voted in favor of a Constitutional Amendment that would allow for more flexible funding options on Department of Transportation (DOT) projects.

State Sen. David Shafer (R-Duluth) presented Senate Resolution 821 that will authorize the General Assembly to allow the DOT to enter into multiyear construction agreements without obligating present funds for the full amount of obligation the state may bear under the full term of the agreement. Any agreement must provide for the termination of the agreement in the event of insufficiency of funds and limit the payments or other obligations of the state to not more than 10 fiscal years.

Under current law, DOT cannot enter into contracts without having the full amount of funds to begin the work. For example, if DOT wants to enter into a three-year contract that will cost \$100 million each year, it must have the full amount of \$300 million on hand. Georgia is one of only a handful of states in the nation that operate under this type of law. Many states appropriate the funds each year for multi-year contracts. Shafer says that this is preventing Georgia from beginning much-needed projects in addition to limiting access to federal matching and stimulus funds.

Sen. Bill Heath (R-Bremen) expressed concerns of obligating taxpayer dollars for future debt. He asked if the same thing could be accomplished by selling bonds to achieve the total amount of funding dollars for the projects. He was also concerned about the state's bond rating and if this sort of contracting would negatively impact it. Sen. Chip Pearson (R-Dawsonville) mentioned that the state already has to incur transportation costs to receive matching federal funds. In addition, he questioned whether this would leave projects at risk for not being completed if funds run out.

Because this is a Constitutional Amendment, SR 821 must achieve two-thirds vote in the House and Senate before going to Georgians for their vote on the November 2010 ballot. If voters decide to allow for more flexible funding for DOT projects, enabling legislation would be created the next legislative session that would provide DOT more direction on how funds were utilized and to ensure projects were complete. The resolution unanimously passed out of committee.

Judiciary

Sen. Preston Smith (R-Rome), chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, introduced bipartisan legislation to enhance funding and efficiency for Georgia's overburdened courts. A judicial operations fund will be created under Senate Bill 429 to fund the operations of the courts and a significant portion of judges' salaries. The bill also appoints additional members to Georgia's Supreme Court and Court of Appeals to help expedite case load.

"Georgia's judicial system is backlogged with cases that need to be resolved, but there's not enough money or manpower to administer justice in a timely and efficient manner," said Sen. Smith. "This bill is the solution to getting those cases heard and providing the courts with additional resources to ensure citizens' cases are being heard and resolved."

Money for the judicial operating fund will be supported by an additional \$100 filing fee on civil cases in state and superior courts. The current fees and add-ons of \$82 rank Georgia among the lowest in civil filing fees in the nation, with a national average of \$168. Some states such as Florida charge as much as \$395. This additional fee is expected to generate more than \$20

million in funds for the courts.

To increase efficiency throughout the justice system, the bill adds two new justices to the Georgia Supreme Court, which will consist of nine total members. The Court of Appeals will also see a panel of three judges added, totaling 15 members. These additional positions give the courts more personnel to handle the overflow of cases and accelerate the process of appeals. The Georgia Supreme Court has contended that it is the busiest court in the nation by virtue of the number of cases handled by each of its justices. The idea of increasing funding for the courts and adding additional positions has received wide bipartisan support. So far, the bill has received 31 signatures from Sen. Smith's colleagues in the Senate.

Sen. Cecil Staton's (R-Macon) bill targeting illegal massage parlors was held over in committee for further discussion. Senate Bill 364 helps law enforcement officials stop suspected illegal activities at advertised massage parlors by clearing up several loopholes in Georgia law and increasing penalties. Several committee members and witnesses raised concerns that the bill's broad language unintentionally criminalizes women who are forced into this industry, many who are underage. The committee voted to hold the bill to allow more time to tighten up the language.

Members did vote to pass Senate Bill 333 from Sen. Judson Hill (R-Marietta) that protects property owners' right to display the U.S. or Georgia flag on their property by prohibiting owners' associations from adopting any policy that limits that right.

Government Oversight

The Government Oversight Committee voted in favor of recognizing the Georgia Boxing Association as a governing body for amateur boxing, wrestling and martial arts (Senate Bill 336). Sen. Gloria Butler (D-Stone Mountain) drafted the bill to allow the association to legally host more amateur events. The bill also adds the Georgia Boxing Association to the list of recognized governing bodies called the Georgia Athletic and Entertainment Commission. Speaking on behalf of the bill was Alexander Beadle of the Georgia Boxing Association, who said that the association is currently withheld from certain events because they are not listed under the Georgia Athletic and Entertainment Commission. If the bill is signed by the governor, the association will join 16 other associations under the commission.

Also in committee was Sen. Mitch Seabaugh's (R- Sharpsburg) bill, which reduces the number of hours of continuing education a Certified Public Accountant (CPA) must complete in order to renew a live permit (SB 351). Currently, the law requires CPA's to complete at least 60 hours of continuing education, but this bill will reduce the requirement to 20 hours for state employees. He said that in a time of economic downturn, CPA's should focus on their work, and not the amount of hours needed to renew their permit. Both bills passed unanimously out of committee.

State and Local Government

Bills aimed at achieving cost-savings and transparency throughout Georgia's state government were overwhelmingly approved by the State and Local Governmental Operations Committee. Sen. Jim Butterworth (R-Clarksville) noted that the simple printing costs for six state agencies,

including the Departments of Driver Services and Revenue, total \$6.7 million. The Paper Reduction Act (Senate Bill 388) mandates electronic distribution and publication in state government, unless printing is necessary by a legal standard, such as driver's licenses. Sen. Butterworth is also carrying the Transparency in Government Act (SB 389), which will expand the public information website www.open.georgia.gov to include all three branches of government, any regional education service agency, all local boards of education, federal pass through dollars and contracts and expenditures made by the General Assembly.

Chairman Lee Hawkins (R-Gainesville) introduced his resolution that urges Congress to prohibit multiple-subject bills and including earmarks in non-budget legislation. Senate Resolution 992 urges Congress to adopt a single-subject rule, similar to how Georgia's General Assembly operates. Sen. Hawkins said this will reduce confusion in Congress and prevent congressmen from voting for something they don't believe in.

In addition to voting in favor of SR 992, the committee also voted to pass Sen. Buddy Carter's (R-Pooler) bill that allows municipalities to determine when it is appropriate to establish a conservation easement. SB 390 also makes it easier to lease property or use a city facility on a short-term basis by allowing municipalities to enter into short-term lease agreements for less than 30 days.

Ethics

The Ethics Committee unanimously passed the Online Voter Registration Bill (SB406). Sponsored by Sen. Cecil Staton (R- Macon), the bill paves the way for online voter registration in Georgia. Representatives from the Secretary of the State's Office were on hand to discuss their office's support of online voter registration and the many way it would save the state money and time. Representatives from the League of Women Voters spoke in support of any bill that encourages citizens to vote by making the process easier, but cautioned the committee that security and accuracy were the main concerns. All groups present stressed the importance of a secure system where only citizen's eligible to vote would be able to register and no illegal voters would be able to slip though the cracks. If the bill passes the House and Senate, it must be approved by the Department of Justice before it can become state law.

Health and Human Services

Community Services Boards (CSB) will now have a clearer understanding of the health care services they can provide thanks to Senate Bill 425, sponsored by Sen. Don Balfour (R-Snellville). The bill includes a better definition of those services and allows them to contract with other health care providers or state agencies. CSBs provide mental health and developmental disability services through contracts with the state's Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (BHDD). Under SB 425, CSBs would be required to treat individuals with Medicaid, Medicare and Peachcare for Kids. The bill also creates stronger conflict of interest regulations for board members. Committee members heard supportive testimony from Community Service Board Association representatives Steve Anthony and Dr. Deril Gay.

Sen. John Wiles (R-Marietta) voiced concerns that the bill did not require public disclosure of certain plans and meetings. He said transparency is important, and the public should be able to

access information. An amendment to remove closed door meetings was adopted and the bill passed unanimously.

Higher Education

Sen. Mitch Seabaugh's (R-Sharpsburg) Georgia Lottery Legislative Oversight Committee Bill passed unanimously out of committee with little discussion. Senate Bill 293 will require members of the Georgia Lottery Corporation to submit proposed bonuses or incentives for the upcoming year to a newly formed legislative oversight committee before the start of the fiscal year. The bill will now go to the Rules Committee where it will await its turn on the floor calendar.

Economic Development

The Georgia State Senate voted in favor of creating an economic development council of state lawmakers to evaluate all state-funded activities that support Georgia's economic development strategy. Chairman Chip Pearson (R-Dawsonville) of the Senate Economic Development Committee will carry Senate Bill 374, which has the strong support of the Lt. Governor.

"As stewards of taxpayer dollars, it's our responsibility to ensure that money used for economic development is utilized effectively to promote job creation and growth," said Sen. Pearson. "The council is an important tool to align our efforts on a coordinated economic development strategy that will increase efficiencies and encourage job creation."

The council will be comprised of Senate and House legislators and will be charged with reviewing current goals, tax exemptions and credits, as well as the Department of Economic Development's (GDEcD) activities and expenditures and other entities. The council will also analyze legislative proposals relating to economic development, as well as researching legislation and policies from other states. In conjunction with the GDEcD, the council must provide an annual report to the governor detailing the state's programs and activities related to job creation and economic development in Georgia.

Currently, economic development initiatives are scattered throughout the budget and across agencies. A sound economic development strategy will generate new opportunities and make Georgia an attractive business destination. Additionally, an ongoing review of state rules, regulations and red tape will further position the state as a prime location for growing businesses.

"The Legislative Economic Development Council will provide a forum to empower the General Assembly to work together in looking at the state's overall economic development strategy and making sure that the money, the policies, the programs and rules are all aligned in order to maximize job creation and business growth in Georgia. Senator Pearson has been a strong leader on this issue and a tireless advocate for economic development and I thank him for his efforts on this bill," said Lt Governor Casey Cagle.

Regulated Industries

The Regulated Industries and Utilities committee met to review a bill that stalled in committee at the end of the 2009 Session. House Bill 579, sponsored by Rep. Howard Maxwell (R-Dallas),

will authorize that a general or residential contracting company who has been awarded a license will remain eligible to receive the license by providing a new agent, should the qualifying agent die prior to the receipt of the license. The issue arose from a contract that had been awarded to a company but revoked when a tragedy claimed the life of the contractor before the license had been formally issued. The bill requires that after 120 days has expired, the company who had been awarded the contract must resubmit a qualified applicant to receive the issued license. Chairman David Shafer (R-Duluth) reminded the committee that they had heard the bill during the 2009 Session and passed it unanimously. The committee reaffirmed their vote on the bill with a unanimous passage.

Natural Resources

The Committee on Natural Resources and the Environment successfully passing an amended substitute to Senate Bill 370, the Water Conservation and Water Supply Enhancement Bill. The bill, which has been the primary focus of the committee this session, passed unanimously along with three amendments. The three amendments included language from The Georgia Farm Bureau, the Apartment Association and the Georgia Municipal Association. The bill focuses on water conservation by requiring all state water systems to adopt best practices for monitoring and improving efficiency by January 1, 2011. Additionally, the bill will also require all new multitenant residential buildings permitted after July 1, 2012 to adopt vital sub metering practices, as well as requiring high efficiency plumbing fixtures in all new construction permitted after the same date. Finally, the bill calls for the formation of a new Joint Committee on Water Supply in order to monitor and evaluate future water needs in the state. Will Wingate from the Georgia Conservancy lauded the bill for being a great step in the future of conservation and water legislation.

Next, the committee heard Sen. Chip Pearson's (R-Dawsonville) Private Reservoir Bill, which encourages private/public partnerships in creating and maintaining reservoir systems throughout Georgia. Representatives from the Coosa River Basin Initiative and the Chattahoochee Conservancy spoke out against the bill. The focus of their concern was that a free expansion of reservoirs on public and private land throughout Georgia would be detrimental to natural habitats as well as water quality. Additionally, the ACCG and GMA both spoke out against the bill in its current state focusing on the unnecessary costs on local governments as well as loss of funds from water revenue. The ACCG implored the committee to ensure proper local input on all new and existing reservoirs is included and the GMA stressed the importance of private reservoirs not being exempt from the current environmental standards which all public reservoirs must meet. After this testimony, committee Chairman Sen. Ross Tolleson (R-Perry) proposed a change to the bill which took out the exemption status for new reservoirs. The bill passed with dissenting votes from Sen. Dan Weber (R-Dunwoody) and Sen. Jeff Chapman (R-Brunswick).

Insurance and Labor

A bill that would require pharmacy benefit managers (PBM) to be annually licensed through the Insurance Commissioner's office was unanimously approved by the Senate Insurance and Labor Committee. Sen. Lee Hawkins (R-Gainesville) authored Senate Bill 310 which will prevent unlicensed PBMs from circumventing the laws of regulations. The bill provides exceptions to PBMs operating in alliance with a medical facility or health insurer, as well as penalties of up to \$1,000 for each violation of acting as a PBM without a license. Sen. Hawkins had a previous

version of this legislation passed by the General Assembly in 2009, but it was ultimately vetoed by Governor Sonny Perdue. He told the committee that he has worked with the governor to ensure SB 310 will be signed into law if passed.

Two bills relating to increased access to affordable health care plans were then discussed but not voted on. Sen. Judson Hill (R-Marietta) presented SB 407 and 408 to committee members, discussing his goals of expanding access for Georgia's citizens to other states' health care plans and allowing businesses to form cooperatives in order to make quality health insurance plans more affordable. The committee listened to testimony from Sen. Hill and several groups looking to address some concerns with the consumer protection aspects of the legislation. Sen. Hill offered to meet with all interested parties to find common ground before the bill is taken up for a vote by the committee.

Veteran and Military Affairs

The Senate Veterans, Military and Homeland Security Committee passed Senate Bill 383 to allow state employees to take up to 30 days of paid leave to care for a spouse injured in current military conflicts. The bill also provides for an additional 30 days of unpaid leave.

Sponsored by Sen. Emanuel Jones (D-Decatur), SB 383 acknowledges the tough position families are in when a loved one returns from war with a permanent disability. The legislation is only intended for the current military conflicts and will not be valid once the United States has concluded their involvement. It passed by a unanimous vote and will now move on to the Senate Rules Committee.

The committee also passed Senate Resolution 1035, sponsored by Sen. David Shafer (R-Duluth). Currently, there are three Navy SEALs who are facing court martial proceedings for allegedly punching terrorist Ahmed Hashim Abed in the stomach while capturing him. The resolution asks President Obama to pardon these individuals as Abed was the alleged planner of an ambush in Fallujah, Iraq in March 2004. Four Americans were brutally murdered and hung on a bridge before being burned and mutilated during this act of terror. Abed evaded justice for five years before being captured by the three Navy SEALs.

Again, the committee passed the resolution by a unanimous vote and the legislation will now be heard by the Senate Rules Committee.