



JANUARY 28, 2010 - DAY 7

Upper Chamber Report

Natalie Strong, Deputy Press Director
Kallarin Richards, Editor in Chief

TOP STORY

Legislative Day 7: Cagle, Senate formally honor New Speaker Ralston, Past Senators in Chamber

By Matt Colvin

CHAMBER (Jan. 27, 2010) - Every now and then the Georgia Senate opens its doors and welcomes back a former colleague to visit with him or her on the floor and share fond memories of time spent in the Upper Chamber. Normally, only one or two happen to be present during the course of a legislative session. That itself can serve as a great reminder that each current and former senator views his or herself as part of a very small family of men and women who will always be remembered and commended for their service to the state.

current lawmakers. The list of those past senators in attendance was nothing short of a “Who’s Who” of present and past political heavyweights, all with a gracious heart and humble spirit to be greeted with a remarkable gesture of respect and gratitude. Lt. Gov. Cagle led the proceedings, and touted that practically every top position in Georgia politics is currently held by a former state senator.

Leading the announced former senators in attendance were a powerful group of current officials: U.S. Congressman Nathan Deal (R-GA), Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed, Georgia



Lt Gov. Casey Cagle greets Speaker David Ralston (R-Blue Ridge)

But Wednesday marked a historic and unprecedented day in chamber as Lt. Governor Casey Cagle and the Senate welcomed back 20 former state senators to the floor and each received a vibrant reception from the

Secretary of State Brian Kemp, and Georgia Department of Community Affairs Commissioner Mike Beatty.

However the biggest surprise of the day came last. House Speaker and

Continued on Page 4

* Follow the State Senate on Twitter at GASenatePress

Sen. Preston Smith Introduces Health Insurance Reform Package

By Kallarin Richards

ATLANTA- (Jan. 27, 2010) - Sen. Preston Smith (R-Rome) today introduced his package of health insurance reform legislation in the Georgia State Senate, which is supported by more than 20 of his Senate colleagues.

“After hearing many Georgians’ concerns regarding the affordability and accessibility of health insurance, I’m providing common sense, consumer friendly solutions. Many at the federal level have argued that their hands are tied because these issues are largely governed by the individual states. If this is true, there’s no reason why the legislature cannot not change Georgia state law to address these problems,” said Sen. Smith. “After meeting with local health care providers, hospitals, physicians and individual consumers and employers who purchase health insurance for their employees, I have proposed a number of consumer-oriented solutions.”

Sen. Smith is the principal author of Senate Bills 330 and 331, which include the following provisions:

- Prohibits health insurance companies from unjustly canceling health insurance “rescissions.” This will end the practice of health insurance companies rescinding or cancelling an insurance policy based upon their allegation that the original application contained an error or omission, which is often not even related to the claim. This provision ensures that no Georgian’s access to needed medical care will be harmed by the wrongful cancelation of their health insurance plan.
- Extends health insurance coverage benefits to dependents up to age 25, regardless of whether they are full-time students. This allows parents to keep their children on their health plan through young adulthood, increasing young adults’ access to affordable health coverage. “Young adults shouldn’t lose their coverage simply because they needed five years to complete college or were unable to find a job after graduation,” noted Sen. Smith.

- Eliminates the common practice of placing annual and lifetime caps on insurance policies. The bill prohibits health plans from arbitrary annual or lifetime spending caps, protecting individuals with a catastrophic diagnosis or chronic disease by ensuring health plans meet their obligations to those with the most expensive medical needs.



- Expands access and lowers cost for small businesses to offer affordable group health insurance options to their employees. These provisions will allow small businesses to pool together through association health plans and leverage lower cost health insurance on behalf of their employees. By creating larger insurance pools for small businesses, these provisions will make health insurance more affordable and more accessible.

In addition to the bills he filed today, Sen. Smith is also a leading co-author and co-sponsor of three other health insurance reform measures this term. SB 309 will allow for interstate competition of health insurance that will increase consumer choice and inject market forces to help increase availability and bring down cost.

Continued on Page 3

Differences in state regulation of health insurance have resulted in significant variance in health insurance costs from state to state. Americans residing in a state with expensive health insurance plans are locked into those plans and do not currently have an opportunity to choose a lower cost option. This provision will allow Georgians to purchase licensed health insurance in any state. Insurance sold in a secondary state will still be subject to the consumer protections and fraud and abuse laws of the policy holder's state of residence. This provision will provide access to more affordable health insurance options.

SB 50 requires transparency in the use of "rental networks," which health insurance companies use to pay for claims covered by health insurance contracts. Sen. Smith says that many health insurance companies try to benefit from an intentionally complicated series of network agreements. Ultimately, neither the patient nor their medical provider can figure out who is supposed to pay a claim and what rate they are required to pay. Without this basic information, it is difficult to enforce payment and virtually impossible to hold anyone accountable for paying an incorrect amount or not paying at all. This often results in health insurance companies taking unfair discounts and keeps patients from getting the full benefit of their health insurance contract. This bill will re-

quire disclosure in a simple, easily obtainable form for consumers and health care providers to determine who is supposed to pay for claims and at what contracted rate.

Sen. Smith is also supporting a Constitutional Amendment that recognizes Georgians' constitutional right to choose their own health care. Sen. Smith noted that he firmly believes no government should mandate citizens' health care decisions. "I'm strongly opposed to the federal government or anyone else interfering with the relationship between a patient and a physician, or telling Georgia citizens what health care they can and cannot have." As chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Sen. Smith will lead the hearing on Senate Resolution 795, which the committee will discuss in its upcoming meeting on Thursday, Jan. 28.

"Reforming Georgia's health insurance through these measures will put us on the right track to increase the availability of affordable health insurance, reign in abusive practices of certain health insurance companies, increase market competition and provide consumer-friendly solutions to citizens' health care concerns, all without bowing to the pressure to socialize our health care system and decrease the quality of the care we enjoy." □

Continued from Page 1

former senator David Ralston (R-Blue Ridge) was formally invited to the Senate Rostrum by Cagle and presented with a resolution written by Sen. Jeff Mullis (R-Chickamauga), honoring his election to the speakership and his work as an elected official.

He was led to the podium by Mullis and Senators Chip Pearson (R-Dawsonville) and George Hooks (D-Americus), who spent time praising Ralston as a man of strong leadership abilities and moral fiber.

Cagle called it a very special day in

the Senate and was extremely proud of having a speaker with the character of Ralston, whom he helped campaign for state attorney general in 1998. Cagle praised Ralston's efforts to create a spirit of cooperation and solidarity with the Senate and said he is looking forward to working hand-in-hand with the new House leadership to tackle the tough issues Georgia is currently facing.

Ralston took a brief moment to thank the Senate and show his appreciation for the morning's event. Ralston mentioned that he is committed to working with the Senate on a respectful and civil level to make sure that things can get done efficiently and productively. He

also touted the new era in the House and that he is leading the way to promote a more open and transparent process that allows all voices to be heard.

Lt. Gov. Cagle took time to honor the following past senators in addition to those above: Judge Quillian Baldwin, Judge Steve Farrow, Joey Brush, Don Cheeks, Chuck Clay, Skin Edge, Bob Guhl, Dan Lee, Guy Middleton, Mary Margaret Oliver, Rusty Paul, Bobby Rowan, Charlie Tanksley, Loyce Turner, and Jim Tysinger.

□

Sen. Tolleson Urges Natural Resource and Environment Committee to be “Bridge Over Troubled Water”

By Natalie Strong

CAP 450 (Jan. 27, 2010) - The Natural Resources & the Environment Committee met Wednesday in order to receive an update from the governor’s Water Task Force. Presenters included Nels Peterson, general counsel for Governor Sonny Perdue, John Brock, co-chair of the governor’s Water Contingency Planning Task Force and Chris Clark, commissioner of the Department of Natural Resources.

“Our state has kept cool in this situation and we must remain focused on our mission,” said Sen. Ross Tolleson (R-Perry). “I am confident that a good dialogue with the other states will help us to meet our goals.”

Peterson presented his report on the current situation in the tri-state water wars and gave a summary of Judge Magnuson’s ruling and what implications it has for the state at present. He spoke in detail of Judge Magnuson’s two findings: that Lake Lanier is not an authorized source of water and that the Army Corp of Engineers exceeded their authority by regulating the water flow in Lake Lanier. Peterson concluded that without any changes, our consistent water supply will be detrimentally affected.

John Brock, of Coca Cola Enterprises and the co-chair of the governors’ Water Task Force, gave an extensive presentation on the governor’s call for a four-pronged proposal. The proposal consists of appealing the ruling, tri-state negotiations, congressional reauthorization and a viable contingency plan. He noted that conservation and good policy would be the key to creating a long term solution. Brock felt that the keys to Georgia’s success was in our ability to Conserve, Capture, and Control. The governor created this vital task force to assess the cost and gains from the public industry side in water negotiations.

Chris Clark, commissioner of the Department of Natural Resources, concluded with the department’s findings and water management recommendations. He briefly touched on looking to the future for viable solutions that can be put in place by 2015 and 2020. He spoke on the benefits of incentives for energy efficient fixtures, incentives for new construction, and the potential need for legislative mandates. Clark reminded the committee that in all efforts, conservation should be a priority and should become a part of the state culture, not just within Metro Atlanta. He ended that we must be “better stewards of our state’s resources, no matter what regardless of where our future is headed.”

Tolleson assured the committee that they can’t just plan for 2012, 2015, and 2020, they must make certain that they develop long term solutions for a dynamic growing state. □

Veterans, Military and Homeland Security Committee Begin 2010 with Old Business



By Adam Sweat

CLOB 310 (Jan 27, 2010) -Yesterday the Veterans, Military and Homeland Security Committee met to discuss several bills that failed to make it to the floor last session. House Bill 674, Senate Bill 216, and Senate Resolution 626 were among the items of business being discussed.

Rep. Calvin Smyre (D-Columbus) presented his bill, HB 674, to the committee which would increase the

Continued on Page 5

maximum prize amount individuals could win. He noted that several of the sponsors have concerns over the current language in the bill. He asked Chairman John Douglas (R-Social Circle) for a one week delay of voting so that he could have additional time to discuss the details with his members in the House. Douglas granted his extension and the bill will be heard during next week's hearing.

SB 216 was next on the agenda. The bill would allow the spouse of a fifty percent or greater combat disabled military member to receive 30 days of paid leave in addition to 60 days of unpaid leave. Sen. Emanuel Jones (D-Decatur), who sponsored the bill, was absent at the committee hearing. Sen. Jack Mur-

phy (R-Cumming) gave the motion for the bill not to pass and committee members voted unanimously in agreement.

Finally, the last order of business was SR 626, which would require the government to pay for the treatment of veterans' service-connected injuries and disabilities. Sponsored by Chairman Douglas, the bill was unanimously passed by the committee members and will move on to the Rules Committee.

The committee will reconvene next week to continue the discussion about HB 674 as well as other pieces of legislation that pertain to veterans, military and homeland security in the state of Georgia. □

Science and Technology Committee Approves Digital Textbook Bill



By Matt Colvin

CLOB 307 (Jan. 27, 2010) - The Senate Science and Technology Committee held their first meeting of the 2010 General Assembly Wednesday, passing out of committee a bill designed to provide more flexibility and resources to public school systems in how they use textbooks in the classroom. Committee Chairman Sen. Cecil Staton (R-Macon) introduced his legislation (Senate Bill 319) which would amend the definition of a textbook to include digital, computer hardware, and technical equipment. He noted he drafted this bill to allow Georgia schools to take advantage of growing technologies and give administrators the option of purchasing digital textbooks and equipment to provide for classroom use. The committee heard testimony from Technology Association of Georgia (TAG) President Tino Mantella, who touted the advances of classroom technology over the years including computer learning software and SMART boards. He stated that this bill would give students exciting new opportunities to learn with interactive digital textbooks and give school districts potential cost savings with having the ability to buy digital copies instead of printed books.

The bill was approved unanimously and now moves to the Rules Committee before consideration on the Senate floor. □

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]*

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