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This Week in the Senate

February 24 - 28, 2020



Past the Halfway Point

After completing our 21st Legislative Day on Friday, we have officially passed the halfway point of the 2020 session. This week, the Senate remained busy by convening for five straight legislative days, leading to the passage of 18 bills and resolutions. While every bill the legislature takes up is important, the bills we passed this week are of particular significance due to the urgent and critical needs they address.

Specifically, the Senate passed a few bills that will bring peace of mind to all Georgians when preparing for a healthcare procedure. Senate Bill 359,

known as the Surprise Billing Consumer Protection Act, addresses the issue of surprise billing and clarifies that any price disputes should be handled between the provider and the insurance company, while taking the consumer out of the middle. Senate Bill 303 would increase transparency in the cost of healthcare by requiring insurance companies to publicly post the average in-network cost for certain treatments and procedures, along with quality metrics that the consumer can take into consideration when planning their healthcare. Both of the measures remove much of the ambiguity and uncertainty regarding the price of healthcare and allow the patient more time to focus on getting better.

Another area the Senate addressed was the profitability of tax credits. Tax credits are a useful tool to incentivize businesses to relocate or expand in Georgia and are part of the reason we have been rated as the number one state in the nation in which to do business for six straight years. However, we need to ensure that any tax credit our state offers is providing a beneficial return on investment to Georgia. Senate Bill 302 would authorize the Chairmen of the Senate Finance Committee and the House Ways and Means Committee to each request an economic analysis of five tax credits each year. This will allow us to gather the data we need to determine which tax credit programs are profitable and which need adjusting.

This week I had the honor of co-hosting the 2020 Lt. Governor's African American History Month Reception at the Atlanta City Hall. Lt. Governor Geoff Duncan and co-host Sen. Lester Jackson (D – Savannah) organized a thoughtful and reflective evening, where we had the opportunity to hear from a number of speakers and important guests to celebrate African American history in Atlanta, the state of Georgia and the country as a whole. This is one of my favorite events to attend each year and I would like to thank both Lt. Governor Duncan and Sen. Jackson for including me in this special celebration.

While the halfway point may have arrived, that does not signify that our workload will decrease. Rather, we expect to increase the number of bills and resolutions we consider, both in the Senate Chamber and in our respective committees, in order to perfect and pass legislation before Crossover Day. If you have any questions about any of the bills we passed this week, or if you have any other thoughts or concerns, please do not hesitate to reach out to my office.

Senator Butch Miller
President Pro Tempore, Georgia Senate

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 24

Increasing Fees on Coal Ash

Senate Bill 123, sponsored by Sen. William Ligon (R – Brunswick), would increase the surcharges on depositing coal combustion residual ash into certain solid waste facilities from \$1.00 to \$2.50. SB 123 passed with a vote of 52 to 2. – **SB 123**

Authorizing Economic Studies for Tax Credits

Sen. John Albers (R – Roswell) sponsored Senate Bill 302, which would allow the chairpersons of the Senate Finance Committee and the House Ways and Means Committee to request up to five economic analyses each of a particular tax provision from the Governor's Office of Planning and Budget (OBP). These may be independently contracted. SB 302 passed with a vote of 54 to 0. – **SB 302**

Designing Qualifications for Structural Engineers

Senate Bill 310, sponsored by Sen. Tyler Harper (R – Ocilla), would create a legal definition and establish qualifications in Georgia for the title of professional structural engineer. SB 310 passed with a vote of 46 to 8. – **SB 310**

Restricting Structures in the Breach Zone of Category II Dams

Sen. Frank Ginn (R – Danielsville) sponsored Senate Bill 319, which would prohibit the construction of inhabitable structures near the inundation zones of Category II dams without certification from an engineer of record. The bill would also create stricter construction standards for structures in the inundation zone and require a breach analysis for already established structures. SB 319 passed with a vote of 47 to 6. – **SB 319**

Reactivating Retired Peace Officers and Correctional Officers During Emergencies

Senate Bill 341, sponsored by Sen. Randy Robertson (R – Cataula), would allow retired peace officers and correctional officers, who maintain their certification, to be utilized by local police and sheriff departments to assist in times of a declared emergency or disaster. SB 341 passed with a vote of 54 to 0. – **SB 341**

Surprise Billing Consumer Protection Act

Sen. Chuck Hufstetler (R – Rome) sponsored Senate Bill 359, which would establish an arbitration process between health insurers and providers and require the Georgia Department of Insurance to maintain an all-payer health claims database and record of insurer payments. SB 359 passed with a vote of 54 to 0. – **SB 359**

Commending Dr. Thomas L. Coleman

Senate Resolution 708, sponsored by Sen. Emanuel Jones (D – Decatur), honored Dr. Thomas L. Coleman for his extensive service to the citizens of Georgia. Dr. Coleman has previously served as chief of staff to DeKalb County Chief Executive Officer Burrell Ellis, the Director of the Governor's Office of Highway Safety and the Deputy Director of the Department of Juvenile Justice. – **SR 708**



Honoring Justice Robert Benham

Sen. Emanuel Jones (D – Decatur), sponsored Senate Resolution 709, which recognized Georgia Supreme Court Justice Robert Benham on his retirement. Justice Benham was the first African American appointed to the Supreme Court and served as Chief Justice from 1995 to 2001. His official retirement will take place on March 1, 2020. – **SR 709**

Celebrating the Georgia Studio and Infrastructure Alliance

Senate Resolution 755, sponsored by Sen. Frank Ginn (R – Danielsville), recognized the Georgia Studio and Infrastructure Alliance for their hard work in supporting Georgia’s film and television industry. The Georgia Studio and Infrastructure Alliance is made up of studios, equipment providers and other film support businesses, which create thousands of jobs and provide millions of dollars in economic development opportunities. – **SR 755**

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 25

Allowing Alternative Investments by the Teachers Retirement System of Georgia

Senate Bill 294, sponsored by Sen. Ellis Black (R – Valdosta), would permit the Teachers Retirement System of Georgia (TRS) to make alternative investments of up to 5% of the value of the TRS fund. SB 294 passed with a vote of 34 to 19. – **SB 294**

Georgia Right to Shop Act

Sen. Ben Watson (R – Savannah) sponsored Senate Bill 303, which would require insurance companies to publish the costs and quality metrics for nonemergency treatments and procedures. This allows consumers to have full access to data for comparing prices and quality across companies. SB 303 passed with a vote of 51 to 1. – **SB 303**

Revising Processes for Abandoned Vessels

Senate Bill 308, sponsored by Sen. Kay Kirkpatrick (R – Marietta), would remove the Georgia Bureau of Investigation from the process of identifying and investigating abandoned vessels and withdraws the requirement to notify the Georgia Crime Information Center of abandoned vessels found. SB 308 passed with a vote of 50 to 0. – **SB 308**

Creating Childhood Cancer Awareness Day

Sen. Brandon Beach (R – Alpharetta) sponsored Senate Bill 340, which would designate September 1st of each year as Childhood Cancer Awareness Day in Georgia. SB 340 passed with a vote of 53 to 0. – **SB 340**

Establishing the Georgia Volunteer Fire Service Council

Senate Bill 342, sponsored by Sen. Burt Jones (R – Jackson), would create a process for certification and form minimum requirements for volunteer firefighters and volunteer fire departments. It would also establish a Georgia Volunteer Fire Service Council. SB 342 passed with a vote of 53 to 0. – **SB 342**



Protecting In-Network Coverage for Plans That Become Out-of-Network

Sen. Dean Burke (R – Bainbridge) sponsored Senate Bill 352, which would ensure that in-network insurance plans that become out-of-network plans during the plan year continue to provide in-network coverage for the remainder of the year. SB 352 passed with a vote of 52 to 0. – **SB 352**

Commending Mayor Max Bacon

Senate Resolution 544, sponsored by Sen. Michael Rhett (D – Marietta), honored Mayor Max Bacon for his commitment to the citizens of the city of Smyrna. Mr. Bacon has served as Mayor of Smyrna since 1985 and has overseen numerous development opportunities, including a new fire station and new city jail. – **SR 544**

Dyslexia Day at the State Capitol

Sen. P.K. Martin (R – Lawrenceville) sponsored Senate Resolution 590, which celebrated February 11, 2020, as Dyslexia Day at the state Capitol. Dyslexia is the most common learning disability in the United States, affecting one out of every five individuals and making it challenging to read, write and decode information. – **SR 590**

Celebrating Girl Scout Day at the State Capitol

Senate Resolution 759, sponsored by Sen. Elena Parent (D – Atlanta), recognized February 25, 2020, as Girl Scout Day at the state Capitol. The Girl Scout organization was founded by Juliette Gordon Low in Savannah and has grown to over 2.6 million active members, including 75,000 in Georgia. The Girl Scouts of Greater Atlanta and the Girl Scouts of Historic Georgia designated Georgia's female legislators as members of Honorary Girl Scout Troop 2012. – **SR 759**

Commending Dr. Katrina McCollum Young

Senate Resolution 814, sponsored by Sen. Tonya Anderson (D – Lithonia), honored Dr. Katrina McCollum Young for her service to Georgia's school boards on a local, state and national level. Dr. McCollum Young has served on the Georgia School Boards Association for ten years, before being named as chairwoman in 2019. She also further serves as a member of the National School Boards Association, the Georgia Professional Standards Commission and the United States Governance Review Committee. – **SR 814**

Congressman Buddy Carter Addresses the Senate

The Senate welcomed United States Congressman Buddy Carter (GA – 1) who thanked the Senators for their hard work on many issues affecting Georgia. In his address, Rep. Carter also spoke about his efforts to support Georgia's ports, including several expansion projects for Savannah Harbor and the Port of Savannah.



WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 26

Recognizing Thomas W. Dortch Jr.

Senate Resolution 827, sponsored by Sen. Butch Miller (R – Gainesville), commended Thomas W. Dortch Jr. for his dedication to serving the citizens of Georgia. Mr. Dortch previously served under United States Senator Sam Nunn (D – GA) and the Georgia Democratic Party, as well as with several private sector businesses. He has been recognized with the Martin Luther King Jr. Distinguished Service Award and a Presidential Citation for volunteerism. – **SR 827**

Chief Justice Melton Gives State of the Judiciary Address

Georgia Supreme Court Chief Justice Harold P. Melton delivered his annual State of the Judiciary address, in which he spoke about the current condition of Georgia's Judicial System. At the start of the address, Chief Justice Melton spoke about some of the judicial system's many successes over the year, including the opening of the Nathan Deal Judicial Center. He also talked about the history of the state's court system and reaffirmed his commitment to promoting access to civil justice. Moving forward, Chief Justice Melton plans to continue to address mental health in the judicial system, juvenile justice and technology to improve efficiency in courts. To conclude, he thanked Justice Robert Benham for his over 30 years of service on the Supreme Court of Georgia and for his commitment to a fair, equitable court system.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 27

Expediting Professional Licenses for Military Spouses

Senate Bill 316, sponsored by Sen. Bruce Thompson (R – White), would allow professional, occupational or business licensing boards to issue an expedited license, by endorsement, to military spouses in Georgia under certain conditions. SB 316 passed with a vote of 55 to 0. – **SB 316**

Updating Registration as a Sexually Dangerous Predator

Sen. Chuck Payne (R – Dalton) sponsored Senate Bill 320, which would issue penalties for sexually dangerous predators who fail to update or verify their registration information with the county sheriff's office within the specified time frame. SB 320 passed with a vote of 52 to 0. – **SB 320**

Changing the Time Frame for Elevator Inspections

Senate Bill 377, sponsored by Sen. Burt Jones (R – Jackson), would reduce the number of required elevator inspections from once every six months to once every twelve months, with the exception of elevators on certain public transit systems. It would also give the Georgia Insurance Commissioner the discretion to pay fees to people carrying out certain administrative functions. SB 377 passed with a vote of 45 to 8. – **SB 377**

Celebrating New Americans Day at the State Capitol

Sen. Steve Henson (D – Stone Mountain) sponsored Senate Resolution 730, which recognized February 13, 2020, as New Americans Day at the state Capitol. Georgia is home to more than one million immigrants, making up 10% of the total population. – **SR 730**



Commending Community Midwives

Senate Resolution 763, sponsored by Sen. Lester Jackson (D – Savannah), celebrated February 26, 2020, as Community Midwives National Alliance Day at the state Capitol. Midwives serve as community-oriented liaisons for maternal healthcare, and assist mothers by educating and caring for them during the pregnancy process. – **SR 763**

Recognizing Cordy Tindell Vivian

Sen. Donzella James (D – Atlanta) sponsored Senate Resolution 772, which honored Cordy Tindell (C.T.) Vivian for his contributions to the Civil Rights Movement and to the state of Georgia. Mr. Vivian served with the Nashville Christian Leadership Conference, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and alongside Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In 2013, Mr. Vivian was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Barack Obama. – **SR 772**

Spelman College Day at the State Capitol

Senate Resolution 822, sponsored by Sen. Gail Davenport (D – Jonesboro), recognized February 27, 2020, as Spelman College Day at the state Capitol. Spelman College was founded in 1881 as the Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary and is currently composed of 2,100 students from 43 states. Spelman College boasts a 76% graduation rate, giving it one of the highest graduation rates in Georgia. – **SR 822**

Honoring the Home Builders Association of Georgia

Sen. Butch Miller (R – Gainesville) sponsored Senate Resolution 834, which recognized February 27, 2020, as Home Builders Association of Georgia Day at the state Capitol. The Home Builders Association of Georgia is dedicated to supporting a safe and affordable housing industry in the state. – **SR 834**



FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 28

Adjusting Costs for Impounding Animals

Senate Bill 362, sponsored by Sen. John Wilkinson (R – Toccoa), would change the fees animal owners pay for the impounding, caring for, feeding and disposing of these animals from fixed costs to the actual costs of these processes. SB 362 passed with a vote of 50 to 0. – **SB 362**

Investing in Georgia's Railroads and Railways

Sen. Steve Gooch (R – Dahlonega) sponsored Senate Bill 371, which would allow the state to invest in railways and railroad equipment and provides authority for the Georgia Department of Transportation to administer the Georgia Freight Railroad Program. SB 371 passed with a vote of 50 to 0. – **SB 371**

Urging Construction of the Coastal Georgia Greenway

Senate Resolution 690, sponsored by Sen. William Ligon (R – Brunswick) and presented by Sen. Ben Watson (R – Savannah), would encourage the Georgia Outdoor Stewardship Trust Fund to support the funding and construction of the Coastal Georgia Greenway, which spans six counties in coastal Georgia. SR 690 passed with a vote of 43 to 8. – **SR 690**

Commending Toni Phillips

Senate Resolution 557, sponsored by Sen. Valencia Seay (D – Riverdale), honors Toni Phillips for being named as the 2019-2020 Teacher of the Year for Clayton County Schools. The Clayton County Schools Teacher of the Year Award is given annually to one teacher in the county who exemplifies teaching excellence and dedication to their students. – **SR 557**



The Georgia Senate will reconvene at 10:00 a.m. on
MONDAY, MARCH 2.