

Budget and taxes stand out as top issues for 2011 legislative session

By Rep. Debbie Buckner

The 2011 legislative session of the Georgia General Assembly convened Monday, Jan. 10, the same day the new Governor, Nathan Deal, was inaugurated. Thank you for allowing me to continue representing you in the state House of Representatives. I was also recently honored by my colleagues, who elected me Secretary of the House Democratic Caucus, and I look forward to serving in this position of leadership.

During this year's session, economic issues – including how to balance next year's state budget and action on the recommendations of a special tax reform council – are expected to dominate the agenda at the Capitol.

Annual State Budget: Although state revenues have increased by 8.1 percent through the first six months of fiscal year 2011, balancing next year's budget will be more difficult because Georgia will not be able to take advantage of federal stimulus funding as we have the past two years. Gov.-Elect Deal, who is proposing a tax cut for corporations, has already put local public school systems on notice to brace for further funding cuts. Over the past eight years, the state has already slashed more than \$3 billion in funding to local schools, causing larger class sizes, fewer school days, teacher furloughs and layoffs and higher local property taxes.

Tax Reform: Last session, the legislative majority created a new Special Council on Tax Reform and Fairness, which has just completed a study of the state's current revenue structure and made its recommendations to the Governor and the General Assembly. A special legislative committee will consider the recommendations, with any legislation approved by that committee going directly to the floor of the House of Representatives for a vote – bypassing the regular committee process. The council has recommended reducing the top state income tax rate from 6 percent to 4 percent while imposing new sales taxes on groceries and 50 personal services not currently taxed, ranging from haircuts to dry cleaning to automobile oil changes. The Council's full report is available online at www.fiscalresearch.gsu.edu/taxreform/.

Education: Increases in college tuition costs have outpaced growth in Lottery sales revenues, causing a deficit in the HOPE Scholarship fund. Gov.-Elect Deal has signaled that he might propose changes in HOPE eligibility criteria to address the shortfall. Other education-related issues expected to be discussed include more cuts in funding to local school systems, a proposal to evaluate teachers based on students' performance on standardized tests and the use of tax dollars on private school vouchers.

Transportation: Last year, lawmakers passed legislation that would implement a special local option sales tax for transportation projects on a regional basis if approved by the voters in the counties included in designated regions. Some legislators feel changes in the wording of the ballot question may be needed to better inform voters before those referendum elections are held in 2012.

Reapportionment: As it does every decade, the state will redraw its district boundaries for the state House and Senate as well as our seats in the U.S. House of Representatives, based on the population data reported by the 2010 Census. Georgia will pick up one additional congressional seat for a total of 14. The reapportionment process will begin during the 2011 session. The new legislative and congressional districts will be finalized during a special session later in the year and will be in place for the 2012 election.

Again, it is an honor to represent the people of Harris, Muscogee and Talbot counties at the State Capitol. During the legislative session, please feel free to contact me with your views on the issues or whenever I can be of service.

- *State Rep. Debbie Buckner (D-Junction City) represents the 130th District (Harris, Muscogee and Talbot counties) in the Georgia House of Representatives. Contact her at 511 Coverdell Legislative Office Building, Atlanta, GA 30334; by phone at 404-656-6372; or by email at debbie.buckner@house.ga.gov.*