

Buckner legislation would regulate inter-basin transfers

By Rep. Debbie Buckner

To address ongoing concerns about the impact inter-basin water transfers would have on communities outside of metropolitan Atlanta, I have introduced legislation that would put into law recommendations that are already in the statewide water management plan and Georgia Environmental Protection Division (EPD) rules.

HB 111 would require the director of EPD to consider the various economic and environmental impacts on both ends of an inter-basin transfer before deciding whether to issue a permit for surface water withdrawals. New rules for inter-basin transfers recently adopted by the State Board of Natural Resources do not include such a requirement; rather only a statement that the EPD director “should” consider those factors.

For several years, lawmakers from downstream areas have sought to restrict transfers to ensure their local water supplies are not depleted and piped to the metro counties. Business groups in the Atlanta region have promoted inter-basin transfers as a strategy to address water shortages caused by population growth and a federal court decision restricting Georgia’s rights to withhold water from the Chattahoochee River. Gov. Nathan Deal has set aside funding in his budget proposal for the construction of new reservoirs in North Georgia.

My legislation would codify into law the same wording that is in Georgia’s water management plan. In my opinion, the state needs to have a system of legally enforceable regulation in place before taking action as serious as taking water from the area where it naturally flows and moving it somewhere else, to ensure these decisions are made thoughtfully and with all potential impacts taken into consideration.

HB 111, which has bipartisan support, and a similar proposal, HB 134, were both referred to the House Natural Resources & Environment Committee for its consideration.

HOPE and Pre-K: One of the greatest challenges Georgia legislators face this session is finding a way to sustain the lottery funded pre-kindergarten and HOPE Scholarship programs. The overwhelming success of these programs makes this problem particularly troubling. For example, since its creation in 1993, the HOPE Scholarship has helped send 1.4 million Georgia high school students to college. Clearly the continuation of these lottery funded programs is vital of the future prosperity of this state. However, lottery proceeds have reached a plateau, while the demand for these programs continues to rise. As a result, over the past several years Georgia’s pre-K and HOPE programs have paid out more than the lottery has brought in. If this continues, all reserve funds for these programs will be depleted by fiscal year 2013. To ensure this does not happen, reforms to these programs are carefully being considered

during the current legislative session. Please rest assured that I am keeping a close eye on this issue and will work to maintain the continued success of our pre-K and HOPE programs.

Redistricting Process: The House Reapportionment Committee held an organizational meeting this week. While it has been determined that Georgia will add one congressional district in 2012, county and district population counts from the 2010 Census will not be available until April 1 of this year. The committee will likely hold public hearings around the state to hear comments from citizens, and the Governor will call a special legislative session in late summer to finalize the new congressional and state House and Senate district maps. In another redistricting development, House Speaker David Ralston and Lt. Gov. Casey Cagle announced the creation of a Legislative & Congressional Reapportionment Office, with a law firm headed by counsel to the Georgia Republican Party providing legal guidance.

House Democratic Agenda: The Georgia House Democratic Caucus has announced its Legislative Agenda for the 2011 session. Democrats are aggressively framing our legislative priorities around three themes: Economic Security, Educational Opportunity and Shared Responsibility. Our legislative package begins with Economic Security, highlighting a weak economy and offering alternatives to Republican legislation that favors big corporations over Georgia families. Democrats are offering policies to help make government open and accessible to every Georgian, with hopes to earn voters' attention by being proactive, responsive and visible.

Tax Refunds Re-Deposited: The state Department of Revenue announced it has re-deposited 32,423 state income tax refunds after the department's error last month had put refunds in taxpayers' bank accounts, then taken them out without warning and caused some recipients to overdraw their bank accounts. Many banks have agreed not to charge customers overdraft fees resulting from the state error, and Revenue Commissioner Doug MacGinnitie has promised the state will reimburse taxpayers for any charges that did occur. The department's website, www.etax.dor.ga.gov, has a printable form that can be turned in to appeal bank charges.

General Assembly Online: Throughout the session, you can read the details and check the status of legislation and watch live broadcasts of House and Senate proceedings online at www.legis.ga.gov. Lawmakers were scheduled to return to the Capitol on Monday, Feb. 7, for Day 11 of the 40-day session.

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