

House approves amended budget for remainder of FY 2011

By Rep. Debbie Buckner

A majority of the House of Representatives voted Feb. 9 to approve an amended budget for the remainder of fiscal year 2011, which ends June 30. HB 77 adjusts the total budget for the current fiscal year to \$18.1 billion.

Spending by state agencies is reduced by an average of 4 percent, or about \$300 million, in the supplemental budget. State revenues have increased during the first seven months of FY 2011 by \$705 million, or 8.1 percent, over the same period last year.

The midyear budget bill was approved by a vote of 136-29 and now goes to the Senate for its consideration. I cast a “no” vote because the amended budget is only a minor revision of the appropriations bill written last year, which cut funding for the State Crime Lab and forced many school systems to furlough teachers or increase property taxes.

The House Appropriations Committee will now turn its attention to the annual budget for fiscal year 2012, which begins July 1.

Driver’s Test Bill Stalls: House members voted Feb. 9 to table legislation that would require Georgia driver’s license examinations to be administered only in English. Supporters of HB 72 moved to table the proposal after a majority of members present added an amendment that narrowed its focus to only the portion of the license exam dealing with road signs. The bill’s sponsor said the amendment “gutted” the legislation, which, having been tabled, can be brought back up for consideration on the House floor at some other time. Currently, the driver’s license exam is offered in 14 different languages by the Department of Driver Services. Under HB 72, individuals in Georgia with a temporary visa could still take the driver’s test in one of those languages, but permanent residents would have to take it in English. HB 72 is promoted by its supporters as a public safety measure because Georgia traffic signs are posted in English, but opponents contend it is an anti-immigrant measure that would hurt economic development in the state. The amendment was approved by a vote of 88-78, and the motion to table the legislation was approved 115-50. I voted in favor of the amendment and against the motion to table.

Environmental Protection: This week, I co-sponsored the Water Conservation Act of 2011, which seeks to regulate the return of surface water withdrawn by local governmental entities. HB 153 would require county and city governments to return to its source an amount of treated water equaling or exceeding 75 percent of the water originally withdrawn. The bipartisan proposal also specifies the minimum lot size or land area that may be served by an on-site sewage management system. Also, I am a lead co-sponsor of HR 112, which would amend the Constitution to establish a non-lapsing trust fund for

hazardous waste and solid waste management. Both measures were referred to the House Natural Resources & Environment Committee for its consideration.

Other Legislation: House members voted unanimously this week to pass HB 49, which would officially change the name of the governing body for the state's technical colleges to the State Board of the Technical College System of Georgia, and HB 107, which would allow the spouses or dependents of public safety employees or highway workers who are killed on the job to continue to receive health insurance coverage from the state. Both measures now go to the Senate for its consideration.

Graduation Rate Drops: State School Superintendent John Barge said this week that Georgia's high school graduation rate will drop to as low as 64 percent, one of the lowest in the nation, when the state moves to a more rigorous calculation formula required by the federal No Child Left Behind Act. Tomorrow's prosperity depends on the education our children receive today, and these low graduation rates show the price we are paying for year after year of budget cuts. A smart and balanced approach would restore funding to our schools. It is an investment we should all support.

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 Tuesday, Feb. 15, for Day 14 of the 40-day session.

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