

## College ban on illegal immigrants approved by committee

**By Rep. Debbie Buckner**

Legislation that would prohibit illegal immigrants from attending Georgia's public colleges and universities was favorably reported by the House Higher Education Committee on Feb. 15 and now awaits a vote on the House floor.

HB 59 would define postsecondary education as a "public benefit" that can be denied to persons who are not legally residing within the U.S. The bill is one of several measures under consideration to address illegal immigration in Georgia, which would join South Carolina as the only other state prohibiting illegal immigrants from attending public colleges if HB 59 is enacted.

Currently, undocumented residents are allowed to attend the University System of Georgia institutions and are required to pay higher out-of-state tuition. Chancellor Erroll Davis told the committee that just 501 undocumented students are enrolled in Georgia's public colleges and universities, a miniscule percentage of the total student population of 311,000. The Chancellor said because those students are paying higher out-of-state tuition, they are not putting any financial stress on the University System and are not displacing any legal residents from being able to take classes.

**Billboards vs. Trees:** The House Transportation Committee voted Feb. 15 to approve legislation that would weaken the state's restrictions on cutting down or trimming trees that block the view of billboards on Georgia roadsides. HB 179, supported by the state's outdoor advertising industry, would allow billboard owners to remove trees and vegetation on public right-of-ways within a 350-foot-wide "target view zone" along the highway where a billboard is located. Under the proposal, billboards would have to be lowered to a maximum height of 75 feet. Environmental advocacy groups and garden clubs oppose the measure on the grounds that trees should not be sacrificed for the benefit of advertising signs. A number of interested citizens from Trees Columbus, local garden clubs and Sierra Club members attended the committee meeting. HB 179 now awaits action by the full House.

**State of the Judiciary:** On Feb. 16, Chief Justice Carol Hunstein of the Supreme Court of Georgia delivered her annual State of the Judiciary speech to a joint session of the House and Senate, addressing in particular problems the state is having with our criminal justice system. She noted that while Georgia is the nation's 10<sup>th</sup> largest state, we have the fourth largest number of people incarcerated, costing taxpayers more than \$1 billion per year. The Chief Justice echoed the comments of Gov. Nathan Deal in his State of the State address last month, calling for a review and possible changes in sentencing guidelines and mandates, along with an increased use of drug courts and other alternative programs for dealing with nonviolent offenders to relieve the pressure on our overcrowded jails and prisons.

**Antifreeze Bill Passes:** House members voted Feb. 16 to approve legislation I co-sponsored that would require engine coolant or antifreeze sold in Georgia and containing more than 10 percent ethylene glycol to include denatonium benzoate as a bitter tasting agent to make it unpalatable. HB 40 is a public safety precaution to prevent incidents of poisoning deaths, accidental or intentional, caused by consumption of these liquids. The bill now goes to the Senate for its consideration.

**Other Legislation:** Also last week, the House approved HB 99, which would require fingerprint record checks for nurses seeking their state license; HB 145, which would make a needed change to the Georgia Physical Therapy Act; HB 130, which would change the meeting requirements for the Career and Technical Education Advisory Commission; and, by a narrow margin, HB 101, which would make several changes to bicycle safety laws. All of these measures now go to the Senate for its consideration.

**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](http://www.legis.ga.gov). Lawmakers were scheduled to return to the Capitol on Tuesday, Feb. 22, for Day 17 of the 40-day session.

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