

Committee approves Governor's HOPE Scholarship reductions

By Rep. Debbie Buckner

The House Appropriations Committee voted Feb. 24 to approve legislation that would enact Gov. Nathan Deal's proposed reductions to the HOPE Scholarship program. In promoting HB 326, the Governor said the cutbacks would save \$300 million in Lottery revenues, which have not kept up with college tuition increases and growing numbers of qualified students in recent years, putting the HOPE program in financial peril.

HOPE distributions would be reduced for most recipients under the Governor's plan from 100 percent of tuition to 90 percent. Only those students with a grade point average of at least 3.7 and an SAT score of at least 1,200 or 26 on the ACT entrance exam would continue to have all of their tuition costs covered. HOPE funds for books and fees would be eliminated, and eligible class hours would be capped at 127. These cutbacks would affect the state's current HOPE scholars as well as future recipients.

The legislation also proposes a 1 percent loan program designed to provide additional financial assistance to college students. Those loans would be forgiven if the recipient becomes certified and teaches math or science in a public K-12 school. House Democrats negotiated for funding the existing, unfunded loan program.

The proposal would also limit bonuses paid to Georgia Lottery employees to no more than 25 percent of their base salary and would lower the Lottery sales commission paid to retailers from 7 percent to 6 percent.

HB 326 now awaits a vote by the full House of Representatives.

Additionally, the Governor has proposed reducing Georgia's pre-kindergarten program, also funded by Lottery proceeds, from 6.5 hours to 4 hours per day and adding 5,000 slots to the pre-K waiting list. Those changes are under consideration in the K-12 Appropriations Subcommittee.

Mental Health Facilities: In the face of the recent agreement between the U.S. Department of Justice and the State of Georgia, changes in the behavioral delivery system are being required. The most urgent change is the removal of developmental disabled patients from the Regional Mental Health Hospitals. While this is agreed upon as the best treatment plan for the patients, community treatment is still required and is not currently in place in most communities. As a part of the department's plan, they announced the regional mental health hospital in Rome is slated for closure possibly as soon as this spring.

These developments will force families to make the difficult choice of finding costly private care for their loved ones or leaving them untreated. Many of these patients have been hospitalized for years and have no family members to care for them. The hospital staff has been their family. While West Central Georgia Regional Hospital in Columbus has done an excellent job in limiting the number of developmentally disabled patients and assisting them in community care, other changes to the hospital system are expected soon.

I am naturally concerned about the future of West Central Georgia Regional Hospital. As one way of addressing this problem, I have co-sponsored HR 252, which would create the House Study Committee on Adult Mental Health and Disability Facilities. This legislative panel would undertake a comprehensive study of the current situation with adult mental health and come back to the House of Representatives with recommendations for necessary and appropriate action. HR 252 was referred to the House Health & Human Services Committee for its consideration.

Tree Removal: Unfortunately, a divided House voted Feb. 24 to approve legislation that would allow the removal of trees adjacent to billboards on state rights-of-way along Georgia roads. Under HB 179, outdoor advertising companies would be allowed to remove all trees and vegetation within a “target view zone” along the highway where a billboard is located. The measure also specifies that road signs would have to be lowered to a maximum height of 75 feet. I voted against the bill because I agree with environmental groups and garden clubs throughout the state who contend the current restrictions on tree removal protect the beauty and aesthetic quality of our roadways. After the 98-69 vote of approval, HB 179 now goes to the Senate for its consideration.

QBE Formula Update: On Feb. 23, the House voted to approve legislation that calls for a review of and possible revisions to the state’s Quality Basic Education (QBE) formula, which is used to determine the amount of funding the state allocates to local school districts. HB 192 would create a 27-member commission to review the QBE formula, which was established 25 years ago and, according to some legislators, is now out of date and ineffective. Under the legislation, the commission would be required to complete its study and make recommendations to the General Assembly by the end of 2012. HB 192 now goes to the Senate for its consideration.

Early Voting: House members voted Tuesday in favor of legislation that would reduce the early voting period for Georgia elections to 21 days prior to Election Day, down from the current 45-day period for in-person absentee voting. HB 92, intended to help counties reduce costs associated with the longer early voting period, would also establish one Saturday for early voting prior to each election. The proposal now goes 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. Lawmakers were scheduled to return to the Capitol on Monday, Feb. 28, for Day 20, marking the halfway point of the 40-day session.

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