

Inter-basin transfer proposals remain stuck in committee

By Rep. Debbie Buckner

Wednesday, March 16, was the 30th day of the 2011 session of the Georgia General Assembly. This is also known as “cross-over” day because it is the last chance for the House of Representatives or the Senate to pass legislation in time for it to be considered by the other chamber this year.

Among the proposed legislation that did not make it through the House by the cross-over deadline and is likely dead for this year, unfortunately is HB 111, which I introduced and would place tighter regulation on the inter-basin transfer of water. Powerful corporate interests from the metropolitan Atlanta area were successful in keeping my legislation and similar proposals from coming out of the House Natural Resources & Environment Committee.

This is a shame because inter-basin transfers threaten the future water supply of communities downstream of Atlanta, including the Columbus area. My fellow rural lawmakers and I will continue working on this issue and will hopefully be able to find other legislation that we can amend before the end of the session to address this important issue.

Other legislation that failed to get out of the House before cross-over day includes HB 59, which would ban undocumented immigrants from attending Georgia’s public colleges and universities; HB 131, which would exempt the Department of Transportation from paying state fines for water pollution caused by erosion and runoff from highway construction sites; and HB 476, which would have set up health insurance exchanges in Georgia as part of the federal healthcare reform act.

Zero-Based Budgeting: A majority of the House voted to require the state to use “zero-based” budgeting in the future. HB 33 would change the current budgeting process, under which more than 90 percent of the expenditures are rolled over automatically from year to year into a “continuation” budget. Zero-based budgeting would require that all appropriations be examined by legislative budget writers. Under the proposal, state agencies would be required, at least every six years, to submit an analysis of its appropriations for the two previous fiscal years to justify its budget requests. The report would also include purpose statements and benchmarks of each program’s efficiency and scope. I voted against the measure because the budget and fiscal affairs are the responsibility of the legislative branch, and requiring these time-consuming reports of our state agencies would take away from their duties and services provided to Georgia’s citizens. HB 33 now goes to the Senate, which has already passed similar legislation.

Columbus State Funding: Further analysis of HB 78, the annual state budget proposal for fiscal year 2012, reveals an appropriations line item that benefits four University System institutions, to the

detriment of all other universities in Georgia. The “equalization” line item would cost Columbus State University approximately \$300,000 next year. I voted against HB 78 in part because it shortchanges our higher education system. Hopefully our Senators will address this funding issue for Columbus State before the final budget plan is approved.

Hunting over Bait: House members voted Wednesday to approve legislation that would change Georgia’s hunting laws and remove the prohibition against feeding or baiting when hunting deer or feral hogs. HB 277 would enhance the management of game in Georgia, attempts to control the feral hog population and provides for both economic development and public safety. In the northern zone of the state, hunters must be at least 200 yards away from deer and not within sight of feed or bait. In the southern zone, hunters must have written permission of the landowner to hunt upon, over or near feed or bait. The bipartisan legislation includes an exception that would allow feeding or baiting to be restricted in counties where there is a documented occurrence of a communicable disease in deer in that county or adjoining counties. The measure now goes to the Senate for its consideration.

Corporate Tax Breaks: A majority of House members voted Wednesday to approve two measures that would extend sales tax exemptions to Georgia companies in the air travel industry. HB 322 would exempt Delta Air Lines from paying sales tax on the purchase of jet fuel for the next two years. HB 234 would extend until 2013 the tax break on the sale of aircraft parts repaired or maintained in Georgia, which is intended to help Savannah-based Gulfstream Aerospace. I voted against both measures because the exemptions were put in place at time when the air travel industry was in dire financial straits, which is no longer the case. We just cannot afford these tax breaks at this time. Both bills now go to the Senate for its consideration.

Physicians’ Assistants: The House also approved HB 303, which would authorize physicians’ assistants to sign off on certain documents now requiring a physician’s signature, except for death certificates and assigning the percentage of disability rating for workers’ compensation. The documents must be listed in the scope of authorized practice between the physician’s assistant and the physician. HB 303 now goes to the Senate for its consideration.

Unemployment at 10.2%: Georgia’s unemployment rate saw a slight decline in February, falling to 10.2 percent from an adjusted rate of 10.3 in January. February was, however, the 41st consecutive month that Georgia had a jobless rate higher than the national rate, which is now 8.9 percent. Georgia Labor Commissioner Mark Butler said, “Job creation is the most important aspect of an economic recovery, and the slight increase in jobs in February gives me reason for cautious optimism. We continue to see a reduction in the number of new layoffs. However, the growing number of long-term unemployed is troubling.”

Condolences: I would like to extend condolences to the family, friends and colleagues of Talbot County Sheriff Herman Howard on his untimely passing March 14. All are in our thoughts and prayers during their time of loss.

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, March 21, for Day 31 of the 40-day session.

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