

## Session enters final days with tax proposal still pending

By Rep. Debbie Buckner

The 2011 session of the Georgia General Assembly is now down to its final three legislative days. Due to a schedule change, lawmakers were not in session on April 1. The session will resume Monday, April 11, for Day 38, followed by Day 39 on April 12 and the 40th and final day on April 14.

Proposed tax reform legislation is still a work in progress in the Special Joint Committee on Georgia Revenue Structure and will not be presented to the full House of Representatives and Senate until the final three days of the session. The legislation, which would implement some but not all recommendations made by a special tax reform advisory commission, appeared headed toward passage until House Democrats pointed out the measure in its current form would actually raise taxes on the middle class, while providing tax breaks for Georgia's highest wage earners.

Republican lawmakers have not been able to explain the financial ramifications of the measure. A fiscal note on the bill showed only cumulative numbers from the Georgia State University Fiscal Research Center. However, a review of the more granular data revealed the tax increases for the 90 percent of families who make between \$100,000 and \$180,000. For some, the increase is as high as \$419. Other groups opposed to the proposed tax bill include the Georgia Tea Party, Americans for Prosperity and various religious organizations.

I am opposed to the measure in its current form because of the tax increase on the middle class, as well as provisions that would eliminate the state income tax deductions for mortgage interest and for church contributions.

Also awaiting final action is the Sunday alcohol sales legislation, SB 10, which has passed the Senate and gone through the committee process in the House but has not reached the House floor for a vote.

**Private Reservoirs:** A slim majority of House members voted March 30 to approve legislation that would allow private developers to build reservoirs and other water infrastructure projects for local governments and water utilities. The 92-68 vote in favor was only one more than the 91 votes required for passage. Supporters of SB 122 said the measure would give officials at the local level another tool to finance projects to help meet water needs in their communities. But I voted against the measure and spoke against it from the House well out of concern that giving grant money to private developers is unconstitutional, that projects funded with Georgia Environmental Finance Authority money would have stricter environmental safeguards for the water than projects paid for with private money, that private interests would have too much control over the state's water resources and developers would receive property from public partners, who with this bill would have the same eminent domain powers as

always, but with this bill could pass the condemned property onto private developers to build a reservoir and could expand the use of inter-basin transfers of water to the metropolitan Atlanta area. The Senate voted March 31 to agree with House changes to SB 122, sending it to the Governor for his signature.

**Prescription Database:** House members voted March 31 to approve legislation that would establish an electronic database to monitor the dispensing of prescription pain killers that include controlled substances. SB 36 targets “pill mills” that provide prescriptions for some widely abused drugs, providing a system to prevent illegal activity. Approximately 40 states, including all states bordering Georgia, have such databases in place now. The measure goes back to the Senate for consideration of House changes.

**Child Restraint:** The House voted March 31 in favor of legislation that would increase the maximum age that children are required to ride in car safety seats from 6 to 8 years. SB 88 would require the use of a child booster seat up to age 8, with an exemption for children who are taller than 4 feet, 9 inches. Similar legislation has also passed in the House of Representatives. SB 88 now goes to the Governor for his signature.

**Insurance Mandates:** The House approved amended legislation that would establish an advisory commission to review and evaluate the effectiveness and financial impact of medical tests and procedures that state law mandates must be covered by health insurance policies. I voted “no” because the makeup of the proposed commission is weighted against consumers, who need insurance to cover these mandated procedures. SB 17 now goes back to the Senate for consideration of House changes to the bill.

**Comprehensive Planning:** House members voted March 30 to approve legislation that would remove the current requirement for local governments to submit comprehensive plans for land use to the state government. Submitting such plans would be voluntary under SB 86, which now goes back to the Senate for consideration of House changes.

**Other Legislation:** Also last week, the House gave its approval to SB 214, which would make it illegal to provide an inmate with a wireless handset; SB 251, which would change the renewal period for insurance licenses from annual to biennial; SR 30, which would require all Municipal Court judges in Georgia to be attorneys; SR 312, which supports the deepening of the Savannah Harbor; HR 341, which promotes increased public awareness about the dangers of firing a weapon into the air during a celebration; and HR 424, which urges the state Department of Natural Resources and other entities to study the feasibility of withdrawing, storing and distributing water from the Tennessee River Basin to enhance Georgia's water supply.

**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).

- *State Rep. Debbie Buckner (D-Junction City) represents the 130<sup>th</sup> District (Harris, Muscogee and Talbot counties) in the Georgia House of Representatives. Contact her at 511 Coverdell Legislative Office Building, Atlanta, GA 30334; by phone at 404-656-6372; or by email at [debbie.buckner@house.ga.gov](mailto:debbie.buckner@house.ga.gov).*