

Governor presents budget proposal to begin 2012 session

By Rep. Debbie Buckner

The 2012 legislative session of the Georgia General Assembly got under way Jan. 9. The next evening, Gov. Nathan Deal outlined his legislative agenda, including a proposed \$19.2 billion state budget for fiscal year 2013, during his annual State of the State address to a joint session of the Georgia House of Representatives and Senate.

The governor said he would recommend three tax breaks for businesses, depicting them as an effort to spur job creation in light of the fact that Georgia's unemployment rate has exceeded the national average for 52 consecutive months. The governor supports a plan to eliminate the sales tax on energy used by manufacturers. He also proposed launching a "Go Build Georgia" program to encourage young workers to take jobs in constructions and skilled trade industries. The governor's budget includes \$46 million for deepening the Port of Savannah to accommodate newer and larger ships.

On education, the governor is proposing \$20 million in the state budget toward a college scholarship loan program for needy students and \$8.7 million to assist charter schools that have not been approved by their local school boards. He also said he would restore the full level of state funding to local school systems and pledged a total of \$257.9 million to accommodate enrollment growth in K-12, the University System and technical colleges. His proposal also adds 10 days to the pre-K school calendar, restoring half of the 20 days cut last year.

Gov. Deal also recommends spending \$35.2 million for additional prison beds, \$5.7 million for substance abuse treatment centers and \$10 million for the creation of new drug courts to implement recommendations of Georgia's Civil Justice Reform Council.

The governor's healthcare budget plans include \$5 million to help the Georgia Health Sciences University in Augusta become the state's second designated cancer center, alongside Winship Cancer Center at Emory Hospital, as well as funding for 400 residency slots in hospitals across the state.

The governor is also proposing budget savings through the elimination or merger of several agencies of state government. These recommendations include folding the State Personnel Administration and its human resources responsibilities into the Department of Administrative Services; moving the Sexual Offender Review Board from the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities to become part of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation; shifting the responsibility for safety inspections of amusement park rides, elevators and boilers from the Department of Labor to the Department of Agriculture; transferring the 1,900 employees involved in providing vocational rehabilitation services and working at the Roosevelt Warm Springs Institute from the Department of Labor to the Department

of Human Services and privatizing state government's aviation services while selling the state-owned aircraft used to handle passenger flights.

HOPE Reductions: According to a presentation made this week by the Georgia Student Finance Commission to a Joint Economic Development & Tourism Committee, students receiving the HOPE Scholarship could see a 38 percent reduction in their HOPE benefits over the next three years. Because of a widening gap between Georgia Lottery revenues and college tuition costs, HOPE scholars can expect to have significantly higher out-of-pocket costs by 2015. A typical University of Georgia student, lawmakers were told, would have to pay \$2,732 in expenses every semester, with the remaining \$2,461 covered by HOPE.

Because of the problem, Georgia Lottery officials discussed with legislators the possibility of permitting video lottery terminals at several locations around the state as a means of increasing revenues for HOPE. Georgia Lottery President Margaret DeFrancisco told lawmakers she does not believe the current menu of games can provide a significant enough of an increase in revenue to meet the demand of lottery-funded education programs. According to Lottery Board Chairman James Braswell, the agency will not add video lottery terminals without a broader discussion with the public and elected officials.

Education Bills: On Jan. 12, the House Education Committee favorably reported the following three bills:

- [HB 705](#), which would revise the definition of direct classroom expenditures by local school districts.
- [HB 706](#), which would delete obsolete, unused and unnecessary provisions in state law related to elementary and secondary education.
- [HB 713](#), which would delay implementation of the career and college readiness requirements in K-12 schools for one year.

All three measures now await action by the full House.

Session Schedule: The General Assembly is in official recess beginning Jan. 16 for the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, followed by three days of Appropriations Committee hearings on the budget. The full legislature will return to the Capitol on Jan. 23. I would like to thank this newspaper for allowing me to share these legislative reports with you on a regular basis during the session. Please continue to contact me with your views on the issues or whenever I can be of service.

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