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WEEKLY COLUMN

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Notes from the Georgia State Senate

By: State Senator Bill Heath



This week I've been focused on two main topics - financial responsibility and the improvement of Georgia's school systems. I know these are important issues to you, and this week I have proposed and passed bills that will help Georgians with these crucial needs.

My Georgia Aviation Authority Bill (Senate Bill 85) went through the Senate Chamber this Thursday where it passed with majority support. This bill was introduced during the 2007 Legislative Session, passed through the Senate, but got stuck in committee in the House. The purpose of the Authority is to manage all state aviation assets under one governing authority, provide aviation services for the entire state, and oversee all state aviation operations. The Authority's goals are to efficiently operate the state's fleet of aircraft, and ensure state aviation safety. Emergency services would always take top priority over any other government functions.

Specifically, the purpose of the Authority will be to:

- Acquire, operate, maintain, house, and dispose of all state aviation assets
- Provide aviation services and oversight of state aircraft and aviation operations to ensure the safety of state air travelers and aviation property
- Provide for the efficient operation of state aircraft

My bill will consolidate Georgia's aircraft into one agency through which all of the state's aircraft can be managed in order to gain the maximum safety and efficiency. By implementing this bill, we are able to provide greater resources across the state for agencies such as the Georgia State Patrol (GSP), Department of Transportation (DOT), Natural Resources, Forestry Commission and the Board of Regents.

The Georgia Sheriffs' Association is in full support of this legislation. We recognize Georgia already has access to great recovery systems through aircraft, especially in the case of a missing person. However, our current system has many agencies and processes to go through before an aircraft can be sent, in which help can be delayed. Georgia currently has 56 different aircraft with 11 different models. This legislation will trim down the numbers to 41 aircraft with only 5 models, and they will reduce their 18 locations to 10. This will proficiently save 17 part-time pilot positions without any layoffs all while maintaining the benefits pilots currently receive.

In addition to saving money through my Authority Bill, I also turned my attention to ensuring tax payer dollars are used wisely. Thursday I supported and helped pass the Taxpayer Protection Amendment (Senate Resolution 1) which manages taxpayer money efficiently, because it seeks to limit the spending of state budget surpluses and helps rebuild Georgia's "Rainy Day" fund. If approved by voters, the amendment will require that any budget surplus, remaining after funding education requirements, must go into the "Rainy Day" fund until the fund reaches 10 percent of the previous year budget. Additional surplus money beyond the 10 percent "Rainy Day" fund would go to retire state debt or be returned to the taxpayers.

When taxpayers send us more money than necessary to run government, we should not spend it. This allows us to properly rebuild the Rainy Day fund and at some point begin retiring state debt along with giving money back to the Georgians who earned it.

I also proposed my Board of Education Requirement Bill (Senate Bill 84) before the Education and Youth Committee this Wednesday through which there was much debate and discussion, but voting will take place in the next meeting. This bill revises election eligibility requirements for local boards of education and:

- Limits the size of local boards
- Revises the current per diem expenses for members
- Designates the superintendent of the district as the secretary of the local board of education
- Provides the fundamental role of school boards and local superintendents
- Defines and prohibits certain conflicts of interest for members
- Provides for the removal of members of the board
- Adds a new eligibility requirement for appointing a local superintendent

- Requires that a training and ethics program be established for local board members by the State Board of Education

After proposing my bill, educational agencies provided their perspectives. I remember one agency representative in particular who suggested school board members be sent on retreats for their training and educational program proposed in the bill. Someone actually proposed a retreat for school board members for a bill that is trying to eliminate those kinds of excessive expenditures. A training and ethics program can easily be provided for in classrooms without wasting taxpayer money. Sending members on retreats, especially during this time in our economy, is a prime example of the activities I am trying to clean up in Georgia's school boards. This is one of the most important pieces of legislation we can vote on this session, because it provides respectful representation to those who cannot represent themselves— Georgia's children.

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Sen. Bill Heath Sen. Bill Heath serves as Chairman of the Retirement Committee and Governor Sonny Perdue's Floor Leader in the Senate. He represents the 31st Senate District which consists of Haralson and Polk counties and portions of Bartow and Paulding counties. He may be reached at 404.651.7738 or by email at billheath@billheath.net.