



Senate Press Office

COLUMN

For Immediate Release:
April 16, 2010

COLUMN

For Information Contact:
Raegan Weber, Director
Raegan.weber@senate.ga.gov
404.656.0028

Heath: Achieving Top Priorities for Georgia

By Sen. Bill Heath



As the 2010 Legislative Session begins to wind down, the Senate and House have worked with unprecedented coordination on key issues for all of Georgia. While this has been one of our most challenging years in state history, the Senate has delivered on its promise to focus on our top priorities and pass a fiscally responsible balanced budget, a plan for transportation funding, a property tax assessment and appeals reform package, and an ethics bill.

Among all of this, I even added a provision to a bill that will allow Georgians to voluntarily purchase an “In God We Trust” decal for their license plates at the cost of production and distribution. It is more important than ever with the state of our economy and the senseless federal government spending that we remember our core values as a nation and a state. Our founding fathers crafted the U.S. Constitution on the fundamental principles we find in the Bible, the most read book of all time.

This week, we fulfilled our Constitutional duty and passed a balanced budget for Fiscal Year 2011. The Senate budget cut \$2.6 billion in state spending, with most state agencies reduced by more than 20%. The Senate accomplished this without raising taxes and worked diligent to maintain essential services, like 4-H programs, education and Medicaid. When you consider that 80 percent of the budget that could be reduced is comprised of K-12 education, higher education, corrections and healthcare, our choices were not easy. The FY11 Senate budget is based on State General Fund and Motor Fuel Revenues equal to \$16.5 billion. The FY11 revenue estimate reflects an 18% decline from the original FY09 General budget of \$20.1 billion or a \$3.7 billion shortfall. The median cut to agencies in the Senate version of the budget is 19% from FY09 and 8% from the FY10 General Budget. We balanced the budget in a way that will help families by providing the potential for future economic growth in our state.

The House and Senate also came together and passed real transportation funding solutions for Georgians, which promotes economic growth and makes Georgia more attractive to potential businesses and residents. Investing in our infrastructure and freight corridors will help us move Georgia products, as well as goods and services, through our state. By opening freight corridors,

the supply and demand channels will move quickly and produce a more stable economy. Products and services will reach across the state and even into neighboring states. This is a big first step toward reducing the congestion and gridlock that prevents Georgians from easily getting to their jobs and families.

Georgia's property owners triumphed in the General Assembly this week with the overwhelming bi-partisan support in the House of Senate Bill 346. The Property Tax Assessment and Appeals reform bill is aimed at ensuring all Georgia properties are properly assessed at Fair Market Value and that property owners have guaranteed rights to appeal. This is the most sweeping overhaul of the Georgia property tax system in decades. As a member of the Finance Committee, I worked to add many tax payer-friendly enhancements to the bill. Property owners deserve fair and transparent assessment and appeals process. While this does not solve all the issues with Georgia's property tax system, it begins to level the playing field between the property owner and the government. The Property Tax Assessment and Appeals reform bill was a result of a 2009 study committee on property taxes. Testimony from many Georgians including tax assessors, property lawyers and realtors was heard throughout the process. This is truly the people's bill.

The General Assembly passed the Senate's ethics reform bill, which will change some of the ways we do business at the Capitol. This bill will bring significant change to the political system in Georgia. Some provisions in the bill include broader authority of the state Ethics Commission, tighter reporting requirements for lobbyists and legislators, increase fees and fines for lobbyists and legislators who break the law, stronger prohibitions sexual harassment, and require many local elected officials to file campaign disclosure reports with the Ethics Commission.

Balancing the budget in tough economic times while still providing essential services, passing transportation funding legislation and bringing about property tax reform are all victories for the people of Georgia. I'm proud to serve you with my colleagues in the Senate to bring about real solutions for Georgia's economic growth and prosperity.

I am honored to serve and represent the 31st Senate District in the State Senate. I will continue to work on your behalf for tax relief, education, transportation and a strong, sustainable economy. Please continue to contact me with your thoughts, questions and concerns.

###

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, by email at billheath@billheath.net or on Facebook as "State Sen. Bill Heath".