

## Notes from the Georgia Senate

February 15, 2008

By: Sen. Bill Heath (R-Bremen)

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As we move toward the midway point in the 2008 Session, we passed legislation this week that will establish an identity theft task force within the Georgia Bureau of Investigation. Earlier this year, Gov. Sonny Perdue included \$1 million in his budget proposal to fund the task force, which will combat identity theft on several fronts, including investigating alleged identity theft, educating the public, supporting victims and training local law enforcement in combating identity theft. More than 34,000 reports of identity theft in Georgia were filed with the Federal Trade Commission from 2002 to 2006 – and Georgia is ranked 7<sup>th</sup> in the nation when it comes to identity theft per capita.

In recent years, the governor has charged the GBI with combating Internet child predators and Georgia's growing methamphetamine problem. Since then, more agents have been assigned to the GBI's High Technology Investigations Unit, and their caseload increased 57 percent in one year. In addition, total drug seizures have increased from \$7.6 million in 2005 to more than \$32 million in recent years.

This week, the debate on statewide tax reform took center stage, as the Senate passed three important pieces of legislation that could end up as referendum votes on the ballot in November. I'd like to update you on these measure, because they affect so many of our citizens.

On Tuesday, the Senate took the first steps in the tax reform debate by passing two Constitutional Amendments that will freeze property taxes at the 2008 rates until the property is sold. With broad bipartisan support, the Senate voted to send both Constitutional Amendments to the House for consideration. These two pieces of legislation propose an amendment to the Constitution to require the freezing of existing real property values at the time the owner acquires the property. Any valuation increases thereafter would be subject to limitations. Once a property is transferred or sold to another person, that property will be appraised at its fair market value on the date of the new owner's acquisition. Any increase in the assessment could not exceed an inflation percentage set by the Department of Revenue for the current tax year. Only significant improvements to a property would warrant further increases in the property's value.

One of Governor Perdue's initiatives, SR 859, will create a Constitutional Amendment to repeal the state's share of the ad valorem tax on homes and cars. This tax reform measure also was overwhelmingly approved in the Senate this week. Overall, these amendments will give Georgia citizens the opportunity to voice their opinion on the amount of tax they pay on their homes and vehicles. We may not approve all of these amendments, but I think it's safe to say we will leave here in the spring with some significant tax relief measures on the ballot for approval by the voters.

Senate Bill 359 will create a "Made in Georgia" campaign, and it passed unanimously in the Senate this week. Senate Bill 359 enjoys broad bipartisan support in the legislature and is backed by numerous business and labor organizations that see the benefit of promoting Georgia-made products. I am hopeful that the House of Representatives will give the legislation speedy approval and the governor will sign it into law so that Georgia manufacturers can give their products the "Made in Georgia" stamp of certification as soon as possible.

Call or come visit when you need me . . .

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