

Notes from the Georgia Senate

April 8, 2008

By: *Sen. Bill Heath (R-Bremen)*



We adjourned Sine Die last week, as the gavel came down to close the 2008 session. This year, the Senate has taken important steps to improve the quality of life for all Georgia citizens. By approving several pieces of key legislation and passing a balanced FY '09 state budget, the Senate has produced a body of work that will greatly benefit Georgia citizens in the years to come. Here are some of the initiatives we approved during the 2008 session, which will become law upon Governor Perdue's signature.

This year, we passed two strong measures to protect citizens from the ongoing problem of illegal immigration. Senate Bill 350 increases penalties for those who drive without a license. The legislation comes in response to a growing number of auto accidents, injuries and fatalities in Georgia caused by individuals who have never obtained a driver's license. A similar bill, House Bill 978, also passed on the final day of the session. HB 978 requires law enforcement officials to impound any motor vehicle whose driver is not licensed to drive. The vehicle would only be released to the owner, the owner's spouse, child or a parent upon proof of relationship and a current driver's license. It is my hope that these new policies will put a halt to driving without a license in our state, and save lives in the process.

In 2005, the General Assembly passed one of the toughest sexual predator laws in the nation. Our goal was to stop those who abuse our children, attack our wives, daughters and loved ones and prevent them from ever harming another person. HB 1059 increased penalties for certain sexual crimes to a minimum of 25 years imprisonment and in some cases, a maximum of life imprisonment. The bill established the "1,000-foot rule", which stated that a registered offender could not live or work near child care facilities, churches, schools or other areas where minors congregate. To the consternation of many state legislators, the Georgia Supreme Court struck down this portion of the law last year, basically sending the message to sexual predators: "You can go wherever you want to." I am happy to report that the General Assembly has reinforced our laws on sexual offenders in 2008 with Senate Bill 1. SB 1 restores the 1,000-ft. rule for those who rent property or work near a child care facility, church, school or area where minors congregate. In addition, SB 1 prohibits convicted sex offenders from photographing minors without parental consent.

HB 89 expands the right to bear arms for those who possess a concealed carry permit in our state. The bill allows those who lawfully possess a concealed weapon to carry it in a public park, on public transportation, or in a historic site or recreation area under certain circumstances. The bill goes on to protect the state against "straw purchasers" who come to Georgia to buy guns. This tactic was used by NY Mayor Michael Bloomberg in an attempt to set up and sue Georgia gun dealers. Members of the Senate feel the current version of the bill strikes a fair balance between private property rights and the Second Amendment right to bear arms. I think that if an individual has met the stringent requirements set forth by Georgia law to hold a concealed weapons permit, he/she is responsible enough to safely carry that firearm with them wherever the law permits.

Some other measures passing this session that offer new protections include HB 130, which will allow consumers to freeze their credit for a \$3 fee, and SB 474, which aims to shield children from harmful online activity by monitoring the Internet activity of registered sexual offenders.

Call or come visit when you need me . . .

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