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### **WEEKLY COLUMN**

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## **Notes from the Georgia State Senate**

By State Sen. Bill Heath



The General Assembly was back in the swing of things this week, and we will be tackling those issues that are important to you. In many of my previous columns, I have stated the priorities of the state Senate – some of these priorities include preserving the family as an American institution, maintaining the safety and well-being of Georgia's citizens, promoting smaller government and improving education in our state. This past week, lawmakers began to consider legislation that looks to achieve these goals.

### **Education and Youth**

Senate Bill 10 is moving through the legislative process now – most recently passing out of the Senate by a close vote. SB 10, or the *Georgia Special Needs Scholarship Program*, is modeled after Florida's successful *McKay Scholarship Program for Students with Disabilities*. This program will combine parent-directed choices with student-directed funding. SB 10 will provide a school voucher for any special education student in Georgia's public schools. If the school their child attends fails to meet their expectations, parents can enroll their child in another school. Simply put, if parents believe their needs are being fulfilled in public school, they are free to stay. But, if they feel that their child's needs are not being met, Georgia's Special Needs Scholarships will give them the freedom to choose another school. I look forward to some constructive debate on this topic, because as lawmakers we need to give parents as much choice as possible when they decide how to best educate their children.

### **“Phishing”Laws**

Recently, we passed SB 24 in the Senate, which was sponsored by Sen. Cecil Staton of Macon. This is a bill that we approved last session, but it somehow never made it through the legislative process to become Georgia law. SB 24 addresses a modern problem we now see in computer security. I am sure that some of you have received this type of e-mail, where persons attempt to acquire your identifying information by falsely representing themselves to be a business. This practice is otherwise known as “phishing.” Phishing is harmful to Georgia’s citizens because those who fall prey to this con game may end up having their identities and their hard-earned money taken by fraudulent means. We plan to curb this practice with SB 24, which will not only define this practice in Georgia code, but also create strong penalties for those who attempt to steal citizens’ personal identification via the Internet.

### **Public Safety/Highway Safety**

We also passed Senate Bill 15, which will increase the penalties for those found to be operating a vehicle without a valid driver’s license or on a suspended license. Under the new law, an individual found driving without being licensed or driving on a suspended, disqualified or revoked license could be sentenced to at least two days imprisonment for the first offense, and at least ten days imprisonment for a second offense. Any subsequent offense would be treated by the courts as a felony. The new penalties would not apply to those who accidentally leave a wallet or forget a purse at home. SB 15 closes a loophole in our current code, which allows unlicensed drivers a certain amount of leniency.

### **Keeping Delta Ours**

Recently, members of the General Assembly gathered together to unveil and sign a letter to U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, requesting that his office conducts a full and careful review of US Airways’ hostile bid to take over hometown carrier Delta Air Lines. Lt. Gov. Casey Cagle, House Speaker Glenn Richardson, Economic Development Chair Sen. Chip Pearson of Dawsonville, Delta’s Chief Financial Officer Ed Bastian and other lawmakers joined to praise Delta and its employees. I am happy to say that Delta’s creditors have finally seen the light, as they rejected US Airways’ takeover bid this week. This decision is great news not just for Atlanta, but for the entire state of Georgia.

These are just a few of the measures we’ll consider during the 2007 legislative session. In the upcoming weeks, look for my column to keep you up to speed on what’s going on in the state Senate. As always, please contact me in my office and let me know your opinions, your ideas and your concerns.

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*Sen. Bill Heath represents the 31<sup>st</sup> Senate District, which includes all of Haralson and Polk Counties and parts of Bartow and Paulding Counties. He may be reached at 404.651.7738, or by email at [billheath@billheath.net](mailto:billheath@billheath.net).*