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WEEKLY COLUMN

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Notes from the Georgia State Senate

By Senator Bill Heath

Over the next few weeks in the State Senate, we will address several issues that will affect many Georgians – including the constitutional amendments on hunting and fishing and the public funding of Social Services, otherwise known as the *Faith and Family Services Act*. We will also be taking up the *Woman's Right to Know Act* and a measure giving local school systems more control over their spending and classroom size.

We heard compelling speeches on the Senate floor Thursday regarding the *Faith and Family Services Act*. This proposed Amendment to the Constitution was initiated by Governor Sonny Perdue and will allow faith-based social service providers to compete for state funds without facing discrimination. I believe that local churches can provide services to needy people in their communities in a much better way than some big agency in Atlanta. This Amendment simply allows churches and other faith-based organizations to do what they do best, which is lend a helping hand to those less fortunate in the community, and allows them to be eligible for state funds to help their community missions. We did not receive the majority vote on this issue on Thursday, and we will reconsider the measure next week.

The *Civil Justice Reform Act*, which we passed out of the Senate last week, passed through the House of Representatives with a few minor changes. The House version increased the cap on non-economic

damages awarded to those in medical malpractice suits to \$350,000. Remember, non-economic damages include funds awarded for emotional pain, suffering and inconvenience. This is in addition to money awarded for medical expenses, lost wages, income, funeral or burial expenses. The final vote on agreeing to these changes was one vote shy of passing, and we will reconsider Civil Justice Reform next week in the Senate.

We passed a measure Thursday to encourage businesses to hire younger workers so they can gain valuable work experience. The bill will allow employers to hire teenage workers at a training wage of \$4.25 per hour for the first 90 days of their employment. We know that many teenagers depend on jobs to help their families and believe this is one incentive for employers to hire them.

We will soon be considering a resolution calling for a Constitutional Amendment that will protect the rights of hunting and fishing. The Amendment, if passed by the voters, will forever protect hunting and fishing rights from being threatened by any future judicial action. The resolution was passed by the Senate Natural Resources and Environment Committee with overwhelming approval.

Also coming up in the Senate is the final segment of Gov. Perdue's three-part education package. Senate Bill 35 will give local school systems more flexibility over classroom size and expenditure control. The legislation also removes the requirement that 100 percent of funds designated for school libraries and library materials must be expended by each local school system at the *system* level.

The *Woman's Right to Know Act* is included on our upcoming agenda and will require a minor be accompanied by an appropriately identified parent or legal guardian prior to an abortion. In addition, the bill states that women be given medically accurate information about the procedure 24 hours prior to it being performed as well as information on alternatives to abortion.

As you can see, we will be working hard in the upcoming legislative days, and I welcome your opinions and support.

Until next week.....

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Sen. Bill Heath represents the 31st Senate district which includes parts of Bartow, Haralson and Paulding Counties. He may be reached at 404.463.1361 or by email at billheath@billheath.net.