



## *Senate Information Office*

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### **WEEKLY COLUMN**

For Immediate Release  
March 18, 2005

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

### **By Senator Bill Heath**

It has been a busy two weeks in the Senate as we burn the midnight oil to get legislation passed in the waning days of the 2005 Legislative Session. Perhaps the biggest news was that we passed the fiscal year 2006 budget, which we believe is a smarter, people-centered and transparent budget. Over the past few years, legislators have had to cut many programs and projects that Georgians have come to rely on due to a downturn in the state's economy. This year, with higher revenues expected in Georgia's reserves, Gov. Sonny Perdue was able to recommend a budget with nearly \$1 billion in increases. Overall, the increases in our state revenues will particularly benefit our children and the less fortunate, and that is good for all of our citizens.

In an effort to give local property owners a tax break, the Senate approved \$423 million in homeowner tax relief grants. Additionally, to keep teachers and state employees' health care premium increases to a minimum, the Senate added \$41 million to the budget for increases in the employer contribution portion of the State Health Benefit Plan. In the Department of Human Resources 2006 budget, the Senate provided \$52 million for childcare and parent services; \$19.5 million for child protective services; \$5.6 million for home and community based services for the elderly and mentally challenged and \$2 million for family violence services.

To continue to help families who depend on Medicaid for their health care, the Department of Community Health will get an additional \$15.6 million and \$1.4 for PeachCare, the program that pays for health care for children in low income families who don't qualify for Medicaid.

In an effort to prevent voter fraud, we also voted to approve Senate Bill 84, which stipulates that a person must present valid photo identification before being allowed to vote. Our right to vote is sacred. Our forefathers laid down their lives so that we could go into the voting booth and cast a ballot for the candidate of our choice. I don't think it is too much to ask in this day of identity fraud to ask the people of Georgia to show a photo form of identification—not just an electric bill that could have been stolen from any mailbox. In contrast to some of the disagreement that we saw when this bill was presented, I believe that we did everything in our power to make sure that any citizen who is eligible to vote can do so with the proper documentation. We put a provision in the law that anyone without a valid photo ID could obtain one, at state expense, to meet the requirement.

Last weekend, the legislature held a rare Saturday session with families on hand from all over the state less than 24 hours after a man on trial for rape, shot and killed three people and injured several others just two blocks from the Gold Dome. It is events like those, September 11 and the Oklahoma City bombing that bring us all back to reality, and to what is really important in our lives.

Saturday's session at the Capitol was designed to bring everyday Georgia families to the Capitol to see the legislature in action. We all were excited to show the people of Georgia what we do. Sometimes we are on the same side of an issue and other times we couldn't be further apart, but that is what makes this process work. I never forget that you sent me to the State Capitol to do a job, and all of us work hard to do the best we can for you, your family and mine. We saluted our flag, prayed and received the devastating news that the courthouse fugitive had killed again. We cheered in unison when we heard that Brian Nichols had been arrested just north of Atlanta.

If you didn't get to Atlanta for our Saturday session, I hope you will come down sometime soon and see what we do. Please feel free to call me with your opinions or suggestions.

Until next week.....

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Sen. Bill Heath represents the 31<sup>st</sup> Senate district which includes Haralson, Polk and parts of Bartow and Paulding Counties. He may be reached at 404.463.1361 or by email at [billheath@billheath.net](mailto:billheath@billheath.net).