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WEEKLY COLUMN

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Notes from the Georgia State Senate *Senate approves HOPE Chest measure in bipartisan fashion*

By State Sen. Bill Heath



We are now past Crossover Day in the General Assembly, which is the last day a piece of legislation can cross from one Chamber to the next. Day 30, or “Crossover Day,” is one of the longest days of the legislative session, and this year the Senate passed more than 60 bills and worked late into the evening.

I am pleased to report that Senate Resolution 125 has passed in the Senate. The measure received bipartisan support, passing 45-8, which is more than enough votes to gain the “super majority” it needs to appear on the ballot as a Constitutional Amendment in November of 2008. The legislation will allow the people of Georgia to vote to limit lottery expenditures to the state’s HOPE Scholarship and the ever-popular Pre-K program.

The resolution was amended on the Senate floor to eliminate the automatic triggers – benefit reductions for book allowances and student activity fees if the lottery proceeds for the HOPE Scholarship ever dip below a certain level. This language passed the General Assembly in 2004, when there was concern that the lottery may not generate enough money to cover the HOPE Scholarships and Pre-K program in the future.

Senate Resolution 125 will simply allow Georgia's voters the opportunity to affirm that HOPE and Pre-K should be further protected for future generations of young students in Georgia. The HOPE Chest Amendment is not a Democratic idea; it is not a Republican idea. It is an idea that benefits all of Georgia. I look forward to seeing this legislation approved by the House of Representatives, so it can appear on the 2008 ballot as a yes/no referendum.

In other news, legislation that will create the Georgia Smart Infrastructure Growth Act passed the Senate last week. Also, a companion resolution to create a referendum vote on Infrastructure Development Districts – measures that will allow an alternative way for cities and counties to pay for infrastructure by creating the IDD's, which are similar to Tax Allocation Districts, was approved in a bipartisan manner.

IDD's are currently used by other states, because they provide a way to transfer the cost of new infrastructure to those who will use the infrastructure – not just the people who live in the city or area. In practical application, if a new subdivision is built, those who choose to live there will voluntarily agree to pay for that infrastructure through an assessment, much like a condo or homeowners fee. Under Senate Bill 200 and SR 309, these IDD's will collect a true "impact fee," and only those who use the new infrastructure pay for it. This is a significant difference from an impact fee, which ultimately results in an increase in property tax assessments for all the residents of a county. With the passage of this legislation, we will allow local areas to use land in new, innovative ways, which could bring new infrastructure to the rural areas of our state.

Please remember to contact me in my office on the issues that are affecting you and your area.

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Sen. Bill Heath represents the 31st 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.