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WEEKLY COLUMN

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Notes from the Georgia State Senate

By Senator Bill Heath

The Senate worked at a rapid pace this week, all the way up until the bang of the gavel which signified *Sine Die*, the final day of the Legislative Session. I believe that we accomplished many of our goals to enhance the quality of life for all Georgians, and the final product seems to be a work in progress of improvement and stability for our state. To outline the legislation and initiatives which will help strengthen our economy, I can start with civil justice reform. We passed this bill after a 3 year battle and we are hopeful this new law will end frivolous lawsuits and reduce healthcare costs. We also passed a new, fair congressional district plan, which establishes compact districts that protect communities of interests. Unlike the existing map, our plan was not drawn for partisan political purposes

We have been able to improve the system for Georgia's second largest industry—tourism. We are streamlining and consolidating our resources. The New Georgia Tourism Foundation will create a mechanism within the Georgia Department of Economic Development to coordinate the marketing efforts of the State's tourism focused entities and develop public-private joint advertising campaigns.

To help improve education, we created the Georgia Virtual High School that gives students all over Georgia access to college prep and advanced learning programs via the internet. This bill was a part of

Governor Perdue's legislative package and provides more transparency about local school budgets for parents and taxpayers.

We also passed Governor Perdue's Master Teacher certification program that allows our best teachers to receive 10% higher pay if they can demonstrate student achievement and agree to teach in under-performing areas or coach new teachers. We are hopeful that this will encourage teachers to remain in the classroom and continue to impact the lives of Georgia's children.

This session we passed the Woman's Right to Know Act, which allows women seeking abortions to be informed of the risks involved (just like in every other surgical procedure). They also can learn the age of the unborn child and options available other than abortion. They will have to wait 24 hours before having the abortion and the bill requires parental consent for abortions for their minor children.

We believe that we have improved Georgia's election laws to make voting easy, fair and secure. We passed legislation which reduces the number of acceptable forms of ID from 17 documents, which include utility bills and bank statements, to six forms of government-issued photo identification. In addition, the bill would loosen restrictions on absentee voting, allowing any Georgian to cast a no-excuse absentee ballot by mail during a 45-day period. We cannot afford to make mistakes when it comes to protecting the precious right to vote.

At Governor Perdue's urging, we passed a strong new ethics law that requires stricter financial disclosure for candidates and elected officials, an end to the revolving door from politicians to lobbyists, and established a Joint Legislative Ethics Committee to deal with accusations of legislative conflicts of interest.

We created a budget that we believe is people-centered and transparent. We reformed the budget process to create "program-based" budgeting that gives the legislature more control over the bureaucracy, including how federal dollars are spent in Georgia. This will increase accountability and improve efficiency and customer service. We were able to fully fund education and health care while at the same time give state employees and teachers a raise.

I am proud of the work that we were able to do during the Legislative Session, but as always, our work does not end there. I am here for you year-round and I encourage you to contact me with your comments, suggestions and ideas. Thank you for your continued support.

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