



CONNECTED to Public Policy

Connecting Communities to State Policy in Action News Bulletin—March 31, 2009

Highlights:

- Legislators have completed 37 of 40 legislative days.
- This week legislators are scheduled to be in session on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, April 3, the final legislative day in the schedule.
- There is still much unfinished business, including the FY10 budget.
- Support from the governor's office has strengthened last minute attempts to expand COBRA benefits from three to nine months for workers from smaller Georgia companies who lost their jobs after Sept. 1, 2008. The expanded benefits are paid for with federal stimulus dollars and are already available for workers from larger companies.
- The Commission on Family Violence is in danger of being abolished. Legislation (**HB 385**) to ensure the Commission's continued existence has passed the House and is in Senate Rules. For passage, HB 385 must be put on the Senate calendar for a vote. Senate Rules will meet only one more time to set a final calendar.

For more information on legislative priorities from our partner organizations, visit:

[Barton Law Clinic](#)

[Georgia Appleseed](#)

[Georgia Budget and Policy Institute](#)

Voices for Georgia's Children:
[Children's Policy Watch](#) and
[Blog for Georgia's Children](#)

Legislators have completed 37 of 40 legislative days. House and Senate leaders were in session Monday and have scheduled the last two legislative days for Wednesday and Friday. Trauma care and the reorganization of the Department of Human Resources are among the major issues remaining in the final days.

BUDGET UPDATE

The only piece of legislation that must be completed before midnight on Day 40 is the FY10 state budget. The Senate Appropriations Committee voted out its version of the FY10 budget on Monday. The full Senate is expected to vote on the budget tomorrow. This schedule leaves little time for the House and Senate to reach agreement on the FY10 budget and finish their work as planned on Friday, April 3. The speculation at the Capitol is that the legislature could reconvene in a special session to revisit the budget once March and April revenue figures are known.

State revenue numbers continue to decline and unemployment numbers continue to rise. Gov. Sonny Perdue and legislators have used part of the state's rainy-day fund and federal stimulus funds, a one-time event, to temporarily fill some budget gaps. In an effort to stimulate the economy, legislators continue to consider legislation that will cut taxes for business owners (**HB 481**) and home buyers (**HB 261**). Many argue that the benefits of passing this legislation will be negligible and will result in further loss of state revenues. Further loss of state revenues and potential budget cuts may place education and the viability of safety net services in jeopardy. Support for passing the tobacco tax (**HB 39**) as one way of increasing state revenue remains stalled in committee.

Once the Senate votes on the FY10 budget, both the House and the Senate will appoint negotiators to meet in a conference committee to seek a compromise on differences. It appears that negotiations will begin over key budget items, such as teacher furloughs and a plan for state employees to pay a higher percentage of health insurance costs.

LEGISLATION UPDATES

Healthy Children

HB 23 (Rep. Matt Ramsey, 72nd) would prohibit the use of cell phone or text messaging by drivers under age 18. *Status: Passed House. Passed Senate Public Safety on March 26. In Senate Rules.*

HB 39 (Rep. Ron Stephens, 164th) would increase tobacco tax by \$1 per pack of cigarettes. *Status: did not pass out of House Ways & Means.*

HB 228 (Rep. Mark Butler, 18th) would reorganize and restructure the departments of Human Resources and Community Health. *Status: Has passed House and Senate. House and Senate versions differ on whether Public Health*

should be placed with Mental Health or Community Health. The Senate version placed Developmental Disabilities with Mental Health while the House version left it within the Department of Human Services. A House and Senate Conference Committee has been appointed and is working to reach agreement.

HB 229 (Rep. Brooks Coleman, 97th) creates the SHAPE (Student Health and Physical Education) Act. Beginning in 2011-12, students in grades 1 – 12 enrolled in physical education must have an annual fitness assessment approved by the State Board of Education. *Status: Passed House and Senate. Sent to governor for signature.*

SB 5 (Sen. Don Thomas, 54th) requires seat belts in all passenger vehicles, including pickup trucks and sport utility vehicles, but excludes vehicles “used on a farm in connection with agricultural pursuits.” *Status: Passed Senate. Assigned to House Agriculture & Consumer Affairs.*

SB 182 (Sen. Judson Hill, 32nd) would extend COBRA benefits from three to nine months for unemployed workers from companies with less than 20 employees, using federal stimulus subsidies. Workers laid off from larger companies after Sept. 1, 2008 already are eligible, but a change in Georgia law is required to allow workers from smaller companies to be eligible. *Status: SB 182 did not pass the Senate by Crossover Day, but attempts are being made to include the language in another bill that is moving.*

SB 92 (Sen. Judson Hill, 32nd) seeks to implement a “premium-assistance” program in Georgia’s existing Medicaid and PeachCare programs. The state would pay premiums to enroll members in commercial health plans, such as employer-sponsored health plans. *Status: Passed by Senate Insurance & Labor on March 3. No vote in Senate by Crossover Day, dead unless attached to other legislation.*

SB 161 (Sen. Johnny Grant, 25th) would require insurance coverage for treatment of autism. The bill would not apply to state employees, small businesses, or Medicaid clients. *Status: Passed Senate Insurance & Labor on March 3. Tabled during floor debate in Senate and will be studied this summer.*

School Success

HB 149 (Rep. Jan Jones, 46th) creates the Move on When Ready Act, which would allow 11th- and 12th-grade students to attend postsecondary colleges and schools for high-school credit. *Status: Passed House and Senate. Sent to governor for signature.*

HB 193 (Rep. Tom Graves, 12th) would allow the requirement for a 180-day school year to be defined as an hourly equivalent. School districts would then be able to lengthen the school day and have a four-day school week. *Status: Passed House. On Senate calendar for vote on March 30.*

HB 251 (Rep. Alisha Morgan, 39th) would permit a student to go to any public school within a school district if space permits, effective in the 2010-11 school year. *Status: Passed House. On Senate calendar for a vote on March 30.*

HB 400 (Rep. Fran Millar, 79th), titled Building Resourceful Individuals to Develop Georgia's Economy Act, would develop programs to improve graduation rates and the preparedness of students for postsecondary education and careers, and provide for model programs for students at risk of dropping out of high school. *Status: Passed House. Assigned to Senate Education & Youth.*

Stable, Self-Sufficient Families

HB 237 (Rep. Ed Lindsey, 54th) provides financial assistance to families adopting "hard-to-place" children with physical, mental, or emotional disabilities. *Status: Passed House. Passed Senate on March 25. Sent to governor for signature.*

Strong Communities

HB 123 (Rep. Matt Ramsey, 72nd) expands the definition of child molestation from direct contact only to include contact by electronic device, including cell phone or Internet. *Status: Passed House. Passed Senate March 26. Sent to governor for signature.*

HB 245 (Rep. Wendell Willard, 49th) allows juvenile court to suspend driver's license of child below age 17 charged with a delinquent act. *Status: Passed House. On Senate calendar for a vote on March 30.*

HB 254 (Rep. Allen Peake, 137th) would reduce the time allowed for a search for relatives from 90 days to 30 days after removal of child from the home. Would align Georgia with federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008. *Status: Passed House. Senate Committee substitute passed Senate on March 26. House must agree or disagree with Senate version.*

HB 385 (Rep. Cecily Hill, 180th) would repeal language that "sunsets" the Commission on Family Violence. Without passage, the Commission will cease to exist after Dec. 31, 2009. Judges, law enforcement, domestic violence victims, and volunteers have spoken on behalf of the value of the Commission's work and its need to continue. *Status: Passed House and is in Senate Rules.*

SB 69 (Sen. Renee Unterman, 45th) expands the definition of child abuse to include sexual exploitation by any person who allows, permits, encourages, or requires a child to engage in prostitution or any sexually explicit conduct for the purpose of producing any visual or print medium depicting such conduct. The mandate for reporting child abuse expands beyond parent or caretaker responsibility to include any person. *Status: Passed Senate. Passed House. Sent to governor for signature.*