

From: Representative Don Parsons

February 13, 2016

We got back to work for the fifth week of session on Monday, February 8, and by Thursday, February 11, we reached the half-way mark of the 2016 legislative session, legislative day 20. With only 20 working days to complete our business, and "cross-over day," legislative day 30, looming, we quickly got to work. Committees were in full-swing, and many pieces of legislation started making their way over from the Senate to be heard in House committees. This week the House saw bipartisan support and passage of several important bills that will affect all Georgians.

One such measure that received unanimous support was House Bill 767, a bill to ensure the safety of our state's utility service workers. This bipartisan legislation adds utility service vehicles and workers in the fields of electric, natural gas, water, waste-water, cable, telephone, or telecommunication services to the list of those covered under Georgia's "Spencer Pass Law." The law requires drivers to make a lane change, if possible, when approaching any stationary towing, recovery or highway maintenance vehicle parked on the shoulder of the highway. If changing lanes is impossible, or unsafe, the driver must slow to a speed less than the posted speed limit and be prepared to stop, and violators would now be subject to a fine of up to \$250. The Spencer Pass Law, also known as Georgia's Move Over Law, was originally passed in 2003 as a way to reduce

risks for public safety and emergency personnel as they perform necessary job duties on the roadside. The law was officially renamed in 2011 after the death of Spencer Pass, a Georgia Department of Transportation Highway Emergency Response Operator (HERO) who was killed while assisting a motorist on the shoulder of the highway. By incorporating utility workers into the Spencer Pass Law, we will make working environments safer for these workers, encourage safety on our roadways, and ultimately save lives, and I am always proud to support legislation that will save lives.

As I have discussed in previous weeks, the General Assembly is always making strides to improve our state's education system, and this week, we continued that effort with the passage of House Bill 739. HB 739 would give the State Board of Education the option to establish a committee to study and recommend instructional materials and content. This bill would also allow for local boards of education to have a review process for any locally approved instructional material. As a part of this process, for both state and locally approved instructional material, either the local or State Board of Education would post a list of all proposed instructional material and content on their website for public viewing in addition to making all proposed instructional material and content available for individual review upon request. The process that is outlined in this legislation serves as a way to increase transparency, provide greater access to proposed classroom material, allow for more local control of our education system, and increase parental involvement. This bill gives parents the opportunity to be more involved in their child's education by providing input on

the materials that are being taught in the classroom, and I think more parental involvement will ultimately result in better student performance.

Continuing in our efforts to increase transparency in Georgia's school systems, the House also unanimously passed HB 659 this week. HB 659 would require each local board of education and state charter school in Georgia to make financial information available for public access as a way to provide transparency within our public schools. As such, local boards and state charter schools would be required to publicly post this information to their website, if they have one, for each individual school in their district. Furthermore, each school and district would send budget information to the Department of Education, where the information would then be compiled by the Governor's Office of Student Achievement and published on its website as well. This legislation would require the posting of the costs of all materials and equipment, staff salaries and benefit expenditures, professional development including annual training and tuition, facility maintenance and small capital projects, and new construction or major renovation on a cost-per-square-foot basis for each individual school. Similarly, the local school board would be required to publicly post their annual budget, along with audits, ratio of expenditures to revenues, total dollar amount of local property tax revenue the school system is authorized to collect in addition to the total program mill levy, and the total dollar amount of all other tax revenue collected to their website as well. Education funding accounts for more than half of our state budget each year and transparency of those funds is essential to establishing an open dialogue about the needs of our local school

systems. As your representative, I believe you have a right to know how your tax dollars are being spent in your local schools, but more importantly, by passing this legislation, we can continue to serve the best interests of our students and teachers at a state and local level.

Another bill that passed out of our chamber this week by a unanimous vote was House Bill 757, also known as the Pastor Protection Act. The Pastor Protection Act, modeled after similar legislation in place in several states, reaffirms the separation of church and state in Georgia. HB 757 assures members of the clergy that they will not be required to perform any marriage which violates their faith. The bill further protects churches, synagogues and other places of worship as well as religious organizations from being required by state or local government to host an event which violates their religious doctrine. The Pastor Protection Act also protects businesses from any ordinance which might require them to be open on a day of rest (Saturday or Sunday). We saw members from both sides of the aisle take to the well to speak in favor and express their support for this legislation this week. Too often, our differences become the focus in our chamber, but it was truly comforting to see our body come together on this issue to protect the rights of our citizens. We are blessed by the freedom of religion in our great nation, and I was proud to stand with a united House to support the rights of all Georgians to uphold your religious values.

Bipartisanship was a common and welcomed theme this week in the House, and I was proud to report another unanimous passage: that of House Bill 821, supporting Georgia's military spouses and veteran population. HB 821 would require

all state licensure boards to streamline the licensing process, specifically for military spouses and transitioning service members who move to Georgia from another state. The bill would allow eligible service members and spouses to qualify for temporary occupational licenses, licenses by endorsement, or expedited licenses to better facilitate their entry into Georgia's workforce. Military spouses and transitional veterans are eligible if they hold a license from another state where the training, experience, or testing meets or exceeds that of the Georgia license requirement they are seeking. Transitioning veterans are also eligible if they are currently on active duty status or are within 24 months of their retirement and have received a specialty, certification, training, or experience in the military while a service member that meets or exceeds that of the Georgia license requirement they are seeking. We have 12 military bases throughout this state and have the fifth largest military population in the nation, and this bill addresses a real concern thousands of military families have faced. Streamlining the licensure process for qualified military spouses and transitioning veterans will give these individuals who want to enter our workforce and provide for their families the chance to do so in a more efficient and simple manner. I was honored to join my colleagues in an act of solidarity to give back to those veterans and their families who have given so much for this state and our nation.

Now that we are officially halfway through the 2016 legislative session, we will begin voting on more bills and resolutions every day. I encourage you to

contact me at my capitol office with your thoughts and opinions, as I am always happy to answer any questions or concerns you may have regarding legislation.

As always, thank you for allowing me to serve as your state representative.

My telephone number at the Capitol is: 404-656-9198

My email address is: repdon@gmail.com

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Don Parsons", with a stylized, cursive script.

Don Parsons