

From: Representative Don Parsons

February 19, 2016

Tuesday, February 16 marked the beginning of our seventh week of the 2016 legislative session. With "Crossover Day" rapidly approaching, we are passing crucial pieces of legislation each day that we are in session. This week, we passed several bills, and among those was one of our most important pieces of legislation of the year: House Bill 751, the Fiscal Year 2017 (FY2017) state budget.

The General Assembly has one constitutional obligation each year: to pass a balanced state budget. This budget will serve as a spending guide for the state beginning July 1, 2016 through June 30, 2017. The FY2017 budget is the largest budget in our state's history at \$23.7 billion, which is an increase of \$673.9 million, or 2.9%, over the amended FY2016 budget. The House was able to secure funding for several of its priorities, including: education funding, additional funding for transportation as a result of the Transportation Funding Act of 2015, health care and economic development funds.

Education spending accounts for more than half of the annual budget each year. As a result of revenue increases, the FY2017 includes a \$300 million appropriation for K-12 education for local school boards to give salary increases, eliminate furlough days or increase instruction days for education. The House version of FY2017 also includes \$5.1 million for a 3 percent pay raise to teachers in Agriculture Education and Tech/Career Education programs, school bus drivers,

lunchroom workers, nurses, and Regional Education Service Agency (RESA) employees. The budget provides an additional \$28.6 million in funding for Pre-K teachers for salary increases up to three percent, as well as increasing salaries for assistant teachers. During his State of the State address, Governor Deal noted that in the past three years, 94 percent of school systems used this additional funding to reduce or entirely eliminate furlough days, and with the funding from the FY2017 budget, teacher furlough days should be a thing of the past.

The FY2017 budget also provides funding for higher education initiatives in our state, including the HOPE and Zell Miller Scholarships. Since 2012, the number of Zell Miller Scholars at both public and private universities has significantly increased, and to account for this increase in eligible scholars, HB 751 allocates \$59.1 million for FY2017 for Zell Miller and HOPE Scholarship recipients. FY2017 also appropriates \$29.4 million in funding to the Move on When Ready dual enrollment program and an additional \$1.2 million to the North Georgia Military Scholarship Grants program. Additionally, the budget establishes two new service loan programs of \$100,000 each for large animal veterinarians and the Georgia National Guard to address the need for skilled individuals in those fields. Finally, HB 751 includes \$44.4 million for formula earnings based on enrollment and increased square footage at both the University System of Georgia and the Technical College System of Georgia. College students will not experience a tuition increase next fall due to the diligence of the Board of Regents to keep college affordable and the work of the governor and General Assembly to provide adequate formula funding. I am proud of the hard work that has gone into this

process to ensure that our students in our state's higher education institutions will not pay more for tuition next fall.

Our state has seen a tremendous growth in our state population in recent years, and as our population grows, we must guarantee that all Georgians have access to proper healthcare. As a result, FY2017 has allocated \$66.7 million to offset Medicaid enrollment growth in our state. In order to see that all Georgians are in close proximity to quality healthcare, the House version of the FY 2017 budget includes several initiatives to ensure that basic services are available in underserved areas. This includes \$200,000 to maintain the rural dentistry loan program; \$100,000 to establish a loan repayment program for physician assistants and advance practice registered nurses; \$100,000 for the Georgia South Family Medicine Rural Residency Training Program; and \$200,000 for OB/GYN physicians who want to return to practice in underserved areas. FY2017 also provides a one-time start-up grant of \$250, 000 for the Champions for Children program, also known as the "Katie Beckett waiver," which provides grants to families with medically fragile children who do not qualify for Medicaid. Quality healthcare should be available to all of our citizens, and I was proud to see funding for these initiatives included to provide increased access for Georgians statewide.

Georgia has been at the forefront of criminal justice reforms, and since the implementation of these reforms, state juvenile justice facilities have seen a 25 percent decrease in population. To maintain this progress, FY2017 includes an additional \$3.8 million to expand the state's accountability courts, which are

aimed at providing community alternatives, as proven alternatives to sentencing, to rehabilitate offenders and juveniles. In his State of the Judiciary, Chief Justice Hugh Thompson credited accountability courts with reducing crime by 45 percent, and with saving the state more than \$51 million in prison costs in 2015. FY2017 also allocates \$5.6 million to support educational initiatives in the state prison system, including operational costs for two charter high schools and expansion of GED fast track, vocational, and general education programs. By providing these individuals with beneficial skills, it will make their transition to re-entry more seamless and reduce their chances of recidivism. Georgia's recidivism rate is at its lowest in 30 years, and I am proud of the work we have done in the General Assembly to give our citizens a second chance.

The final portion of the FY2017 budget I would like to highlight is the inclusion of hundreds of millions of new transportation dollars to improve our state's transportation infrastructure. As a result of House Bill 170, the Transportation Funding Act of 2015, FY2017 appropriates \$825.6 million in new state general and motor fuel funds to help improve the state's roads and bridges to keep freight and our commuters moving safely and efficiently. Of those funds, \$543.1 million are budgeted for capital construction and maintenance projects; \$204.7 for routine maintenance; and \$41 million in Local Maintenance and Improvement Grants (LMIG). An additional \$1 million in bonds were also allocated for the repair, replacement, and renovation of our state's bridges to ensure safety for all who travel on our roadways. Prior to the passage of HB 170, Georgia's roads averaged resurfacing once every 50 years. As our population has

grown, so has our need for transportation investment, and with this new funding, we will now have the ability to dedicate the essential resources to addressing Georgia's infrastructure needs. I applaud the Georgia Department of Transportation for their long-term solution to our current issue, and I encourage you to view their website and the list of upcoming projects at www.GAroads.org.

In addition to passing the FY2017 budget this week, the House passed a number of important bills that are now being considered by the state Senate. House Bill 34, also known as the "Georgia Right to Try Act," was unanimously passed by the House and would give some terminally-ill patients faster access to experimental drugs and procedures that have passed the first of three phases in the FDA drug approval process. Full FDA clearance of all three phases can take as long as ten years, but with HB 34, terminally-ill patients would have the option of trying experimental treatments that have passed the FDA's Phase 1, meaning the treatments have met all safety precautions. Physicians would be required to provide written documentation for eligible patients stating that the individual has a terminal illness; has considered all other treatment options currently approved by the FDA; has been given a recommendation by the physician; and has given written informed consent for the use of the investigational drug biological product, or device. Manufacturers of certain experimental drugs will not be required to offer or charge for the treatment, and health benefit plans have the option to provide coverage to investigational products, but will not be required to cover the costs. Any medical physician, who recommends, prescribes, or treats an eligible patient with investigational drugs, would not be held liable by

the Georgia Composite Medical Board under HB 34. There are 24 states that have similar legislation in place, and it is my hope that Georgia will become the 25th state to enact this type of legislation to offer some Georgians an opportunity at life-altering treatment.

Another significant measure that passed out of our chamber with overwhelming support was House Bill 798. HB 798 would change some requirements for the HOPE and Zell Miller Scholarships to consider home schooled students and students graduating from previously ineligible or non-accredited high schools. Eligibility would be determined by standardized college admissions tests, such as the SAT and ACT, which are available to all students. Home schooled students and students graduating from ineligible high schools that score in the 75th percentile or higher nationally would be eligible for the HOPE Scholarship. Students who score in the 93rd percentile or higher nationally would be eligible for the Zell Miller Scholarship. The bill also changes the Zell Miller Scholarship eligibility for students graduating from eligible high schools by requiring a score in the 80th percentile or higher on the ACT or the SAT, in addition to maintaining a minimum 3.7 GPA. The HOPE Scholarship was created to keep our state's brightest students in Georgia for college, and this legislation would give even more students that chance.

House Bill 879 is another education bill that passed out of the House this week. This bill creates the "Georgia Seal of Biliteracy" to recognize high school graduates who are proficient in speaking, reading, and writing one or more languages in addition to English. Students may qualify to receive the Georgia

Seal of Biliteracy with a score of four or higher on a foreign language advanced placement exam, with a score of five or higher on a foreign language international baccalaureate exam, by completing a four-year high school course in a foreign language with an overall GPA of 3.0 or above in that coursework, or by passing the SAT II foreign language exam with a score of 600 or higher. The Georgia Department of Education would provide the insignia to be attached to qualifying students' diplomas to indicate that the student earned the Georgia Seal of Biliteracy. Each local school system could choose to opt-in to the program but would not be forced to participate or expend resources. It is our duty to encourage our students to broaden their horizons, and the Georgia Seal of Biliteracy will not only promote the study of foreign language, but it will certify their knowledge for future college and job applications.

Finally, my colleagues and I unanimously passed legislation in the House this week which would make the "adoptable dog" the official state dog of Georgia. By naming the "adoptable dog" as the official state dog of Georgia, House Bill 561 will promote animal rescue and adoption, as well as responsible pet ownership. Eligible "adoptable dogs" are available through local animal shelters, humane societies, and public or private animal refuge organizations. According to the National Council on Pet Population Study and Policy, by encouraging responsible pet ownership the number of unwanted dogs who eventually end up in shelters will be greatly reduced. This bill brings awareness to the importance of adopting animals from shelters, where they face a high risk of being euthanized, and will help save the lives of many shelter animals.

Now that we have passed the annual budget and are more than halfway through the 2016 legislative session, we will begin to vote on more legislation under the Gold Dome. During this time, I hope that you will contact me with your questions or concerns so that I can apply your ideas and opinions to these last few weeks of lawmaking. You are always welcome and encouraged to visit my office at the State Capitol. My office number is 404-656-9198 and my email is repdon@gmail.com. I look forward to hearing from you.

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