



LEGISLATIVE Update

31 March 2016

General Assembly

The 2016 Georgia General Assembly adjourned sine die last Thursday, March 24th. One interesting development on the final day was the legislature went beyond the normally accepted midnight deadline. For GRA, 2016 was mainly a year for defense as we worked against bills that would raise trucks weights, impose franchise fees, increase litigation costs, etc.

GRA Legislative Tracking List

HB 411:

GRA Position: Oppose

GRA and its members joined with several other groups such as ACCG, GMA, AAA Auto Club Group, Road Safe America, Smart Transportation, and various law enforcement groups to oppose HB 411, which would have raised the allowable base weight from 80,000 to 84,000 lbs. with a 5 percent variance for shippers of unfinished wood products. Numerous other shipping groups sought to add their industry to this proposed exception. After the bill failed to ‘cross-over’ in time for further consideration, GRA helped oppose efforts to amend another transportation bill to allow for an additional 2000 lbs. for trucks that installed a kit to burn natural gas.

HB 789:

GRA Position: Oppose

This bill sought to create authority for counties to collect franchise fees against entities including railroads. GRA opposed this legislation and testified against the

bill in the House Energy, Utilities and Telecommunications Committee sub-committee. The bill did not receive a committee vote, did not pass the House, and was not further considered.

HB 727:

GRA Position: Monitor

This bill amended the fireworks bill that passed last year. New language was added that makes it unlawful to ignite fireworks from railroad right of way. This language, along with the trespass statute that was strengthened two years ago, provides GRA members better protection from legal liability regarding the use of railroad right of way.

HB 1017:

This is the ‘E-discovery’ bill that caused an outpouring of opposition from our members and the Georgia Chamber of Commerce. Fortunately, this bill, which received a “Do Pass” recommendation from the House Judiciary Committee, did not make it to a floor vote. Consequently, it appears to be done for the year. Undoubtedly, this issue will return next year for another round.

HB 779:

GRA monitored this bill related to the regulation of drones. The version that passed the House addressed concerns of business by basically limiting the restrictions to law enforcement. This allows business groups such as GRA to continue to use drones for business purposes without onerous regulation.

MARTA Funding:

GRA monitored the transit funding issue throughout the session. After the original Senate bill did not cross over, the issue was presumed dead for the session. However, led by House Speaker Pro Tem Jan Jones and Mayor Kasim Reed, language was included in SB 369 that allows for immediate referendum votes in the City of Atlanta for MARTA expansion and other transportation projects. The bill also creates a procedure for Fulton county and other Fulton municipalities to have a referendum in the future to accomplish projects selected by the County Commission and these municipalities.

Income Tax Reduction:

In spite of a tremendous effort by Senate Finance Committee Chairman Judson Hill (R-Cobb), bills lowering the state income tax failed. HB 238 would have cut the state’s income tax rate from 6 percent to 5.4 percent. SR 756 would have put a

permanent cap on the state budget by triggering automatic reductions in the income tax rate whenever revenue growth rose above specified levels.

Summary

The 2016 session was in many ways similar to other election year sessions with heavy doses of social issues and special interest tax breaks totaling almost \$500 million. For GRA, it was a successful year in that nothing detrimental happened to our industry in spite of various efforts.

GRA enjoyed working with longtime friends like Senate Transportation Chairman Tommie Williams (R-Lyons), who announced his retirement. We also were impressed with the leadership and wisdom of the new House Transportation Committee Chairman Christian Coomer (R-Cartersville). With numerous retirements and several contested elections, next year promises to bring a number of new faces to the Capitol and to different positions within the committee structures. Of course, we will again be hosting an event for recently elected freshman in the fall.

GRA looks forward to working with its members to prepare for the 2017 session. In particular, we anticipate presenting to the membership for consideration a proposal that would create a Georgia railroad program administered by the state. Members of our legislative committee are working on initial drafts and we will spend the spring laboring to get a proposal together that would benefit all of our members.

We have sent out a ‘Save the Date’ for our Annual Meeting that is being held June 6-8 in Savannah. More details on this important meeting will follow.