



Legislative Update

March 5, 2021

GRA Legislative Agenda Items

Truck Size and Weight: Oppose any legislation that increases the allowable size and weight of truck carrying freight. Typically, advocates seek to revise O.C.G.A. 32-6-26 (g) (1), which allows for a weight increase and various radius distance increases for forest products, live poultry, cotton, feed, granite, raw ore or minerals, solid waste concrete or poultry.

This week the Senate Transportation Committee heard testimony on Senator Tyler Harper's (R-Ocilla) [Senate Bill 118](#), which would allow for the issuance of an annual forest product permit allowing 100,000 lbs. for vehicles hauling forest products from the forest where cut to the first point of marketing or processing if the vehicle has six axles.

Senate Transportation Committee Chairman Frank Ginn created a subcommittee to analyze and research the bill between this session and the next session. The Sub-committee Members are Sen. Ginn, Sen. Steve Gooch (R-Dahlonega), Sen. David Lucas (D-Macon), Sen. Burt Jones (R-Jackson), Sen. Lindsey Tippins (R-Marietta), and the bill's author Sen. Tyler Harper (R-Ocilla).

While we are encouraged by Chairman Ginn's action, we will continue to actively oppose the bill through the end of session.

Earlier this session, Representative James Burchett (R-Waycross) introduced [House Bill 496](#), which also seeks to increase the allowable weight to 95,000 lbs. for trucks carrying forest products. We will be continuing to monitor this legislation and actively work with other groups opposed to increased truck weights to ensure this legislation does not pass. It has not received a hearing by the House Transportation Committee.

Short Line Tax Credit: Last week House Transportation Chairman Rick Jasperse (R-Jasper) introduced [House Bill 452](#), which will extend the sunset for the short line income tax credit by five years from December 30, 2023 to December 30, 2028. Last week the measure was included in [House Bill 587](#) (see page 24 of the bill), the Georgia Economic Recovery Act of 2021, which also addresses several other income tax credits.

The bill was carried by House Majority Caucus Secretary/Treasurer Bruce Williamson (R-Monroe) in the House. GRA has been actively lobbying for the short line tax credit sunset extension, and HB 587 was favorably reported out of the Ways and Means Committee last week. It was voted on by the full House this week and passed by a vote of 157 to 14; next it heads to the Senate for consideration.

Freight and Logistics: Following the work done by the Joint Commission on Freight and Logistics over the last two years, this session Senator Steve Gooch (R-Dahlonega) has introduced legislation to create a

similar commission with a slightly different name. [Senate Resolution 102](#) would create the Georgia Commission on E-Commerce and Freight Infrastructure Funding. The resolution recognizes that the “current and future economic health of Georgia relies on a thriving and productive freight and logistics industry.” It also mentions the Freight and Logistics Commission’s finding from last year that the state needs to invest \$1.5 billion annually in our freight and logistics infrastructure. The resolution has been passed out of the Senate Transportation Committee and will need to be passed out of the Senate by Monday.

Two Man Crew: Oppose any legislation which would seek to require a train that is in use for the movement of freight to operate with at least two crew members. Similar legislation was introduced in the 2019 session. We are closely monitoring this issue, but no legislation has been introduced at this point.

Blocked Crossing: Oppose any bills that would prevent a railroad common carrier from authorizing the operation of a train that causes a road to be blocked for longer than 15 minutes. Similar legislation has been introduced in recent years. Freshman Representative Mesha Mainor (D-Atlanta) introduced [House Bill 139](#), which prohibits a train from blocking any street, road, or highway grade crossing for longer than 15 minutes, except under certain circumstances. This bill was assigned to the House Transportation Committee for consideration, but it has not received a hearing.

Georgia 811: Oppose any legislation which would remove the Georgia 811 exemption for railroads, thereby requiring them to join Georgia 811, “call before you dig.” Georgia code currently exempts railroads from mandatory Georgia 811 membership. Any attempts to change the law to make Georgia 811 membership compulsory for railroads would be harmful to the industry, as it would slow railroads down. We are closely monitoring this issue, but no legislation has been introduced at this point.

Overview of General Assembly

Legislators convened on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday of this week for Legislative Days 25 through 27. Crossover Day is Monday, March 8, so any bill that does not pass out of its respective chamber by the end of the day on Monday is ineligible for further action this session. However, because the legislature has two-year sessions, any bill that does not cross over to the other chamber this year will still be eligible for consideration next year. In addition to a dramatic increase in the number of bills on the floor in both chambers this week, committees also worked diligently this week to pass out bills so that they may be eligible for consideration on the floor as late as Monday.

The House and Senate set the legislative calendar in sections, and leaders in both chambers have come to an agreement on the remaining Legislative Days, which will take us through Day 40, or Sine Die, on March 31.

Budget

On Friday morning the House took up the Fiscal Year 2022 budget, [House Bill 81](#). House Appropriations subcommittees have been hard at work for weeks, convening to hear testimony from relevant department heads, to develop their budget recommendations for the new fiscal year, which runs from July 1, 2021 to June 30, 2022.

Appropriations Chairman Terry England (R-Auburn) took the podium on the House floor on Friday morning to walk his colleagues through many of the highlights of the budget they had crafted. The \$27.2 billion budget is an increase of 5.2 percent over the previous fiscal year. 56.4 percent of the House’s budget recommendations would be dedicated to education, which, like the governor’s budget recommendations, includes a 60 percent restoration of the education funding cuts made last year to combat a projected revenue shortage due to the pandemic. The budget passed by a vote of 136 to 31 and was immediately transmitted to the Senate to be first read.

OneGeorgia Authority Act

[Senate Bill 255](#), sponsored by Senate Rules Chairman Jeff Mullis (R-Chickamauga), would create a grant program known as the Border Regional Retail Tourism Development Program, the purpose of which would be to support border region retail and tourism projects. The bill defines “border region” as any part of the state that lies within ten miles of the state border. It seeks to encourage businesses that are considering relocating or expanding to do so in Georgia rather than a bordering state. The legislation sets up the process by which grants may be awarded, though the grants are subject to appropriations. It received a favorable recommendation from the Economic Development and Tourism Committee this week and was passed by the Senate by a margin of 47 to 1.

Gambling Bills

[Senate Resolution 135](#), sponsored by Senate Rules Chairman Jeff Mullis (R-Chickamauga), would amend the State Constitution to allow for sports betting if a majority of voters at the polls approve of the measure. A related bill, [Senate Bill 142](#), also sponsored by Chairman Mullis, would set up the structure for sports betting in the state. If approved, sports wagering would fall under the purview of the Georgia Lottery Corporation, and net proceeds would be required to go towards educational improvements in the state. After being approved by the Senate Regulated Industries and Utilities Committee last week, the two measures were voted on and approved by the full Senate on Friday. Senator Bill Cowser (R-Athens) successfully amended Senate Bill 142 to clarify that the effective date would be January 1, 2023 if approved by voters in the 2022 general election. Both measures will next head to the House for consideration.

Earlier this session Representative Ron Stephens (R-Savannah) filed [House Resolution 30](#), which would ask Georgians on the 2022 ballot whether they support allowing casinos in the state. After being moved from the Economic Development and Tourism Committee to the Regulated Industries Committee earlier this session, this week it was scheduled for a hearing in subcommittee. The Regulated Industries Lottery Oversight Gaming Subcommittee, chaired by Representative Kasey Carpenter (R-Dalton) approved the measure, which means it is now eligible to be heard by the full committee. However, the measure must be passed out of the full committee and then the full House by Crossover Day for continued consideration this session.

Election Reform Bills

Reforming Georgia’s election law remains one of the most widely discussed topics this session. Dozens of bills from both sides of the aisle have been introduced and considered this session, which has kept the Senate Ethics Committee and House Special Committee on Election Integrity especially busy.

The House and Senate Majority Caucuses have both come out with their own versions of an omnibus election reform bill. Senate Majority Leader Mike Dugan (R-Carrollton) has introduced [Senate Bill 241](#), which passed out of the Senate Ethics Committee this week. Its provisions include, but are not limited to, creating a hotline within the Attorney General’s office for voters to report cases of election irregularities and voter intimidation; clarifying the duties of the State Election Board; requiring the Secretary of State to participate in a multistate voter registration system to cross-check voter registration in other states; and designating certain voters, including those 65 and older, as eligible to absentee vote, though it clarifies that any voter would be eligible to vote early. The measure will likely be considered by the full Senate on Monday.

The Georgia House Republican Caucus released their own omnibus election reform bill, [House Bill 531](#), sponsored by Representative Barry Fleming (R-Harlem), who chairs the House Special Committee on Election Integrity. The bill, which has garnered a great deal of attention this week, also proposes significant changes to Georgia’s election laws. The measure, which passed out of committee, would replace the signature match used for absentee ballot verification with ID verification; require that ballot drop boxes are actively monitored; ban out of precinct voting; and promote quicker results on Election Day. After several hours of debate on the House floor this week, the measure passed by a vote of 97 to 72 and will be considered by the Senate next.

In response to critics who say there is a financial barrier to many Georgians to obtain proper identification, this week Speaker David Ralston (R-Blue Ridge) announced his proposal for the state to offer free state identification to individuals who would need it in order to vote under the new proposed law.

Mixed Drinks To Go

[Senate Bill 236](#), sponsored by Senator Matt Brass (R-Newnan), would codify the ability of restaurants to sell mixed drinks for off-premises consumption in approved containers under certain conditions. The measure would apply to food service establishments that are licensed to sell distilled spirits for consumption on the premises. It would allow individuals to purchase up to two mixed drinks to go per entree ordered. The bill was passed out of the Senate Regulated Industries and Utilities Committee this week and passed by the full Senate on Friday.