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Weekly Legislative Report # 11

Week Ending March 27, 2020

Last week's political highlight was a Thursday evening town hall meeting aired statewide on TV stations and the PBS radio network. Governor Brian Kemp was joined by Public Health Commissioner Kathleen Toomey, Insurance Commissioner John King and GEMA Director Homer Bryson, each of whom held forth at a different media outlet or venue. Reporters asked questions remotely, several sequestered in their personal homes, as a way to emphasize the importance of sheltering in place.

On Friday members of the Kemp administration presided over a conference call with state legislators to allow them to ask follow-up questions to the previous evening's briefing. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution printed a summary of the Q&A without specifying its source. These points were made in response to questions from both Republican and Democratic members.

Selected highlights from that summary:

Mark Hamilton, the Governor's Director of External Affairs, told legislators:

- The state's Unemployment Trust Fund is robust, but could be impacted by the eventual number of claims and length of the crisis.
- For the week ending March 21, there were 12,140 UI claims, more than double the previous week.
- Gov. Kemp has formed an Economic Impact Subcommittee of his COVID-19 task force to be chaired by State Fiscal Economist Jeffrey Dorfman.
- The state is analyzing what funds will come from the federal stimulus program passed by Congress on Friday.
- There will be numerous changes to help the SNAP (food stamps) program serve people during the crisis, including waiving proof of work requirements during April

and May. The state will also automatically recertify food stamp beneficiaries for the next few months. Food stamp applications have skyrocketed as workers have been laid off, reaching 9,000 on one recent day.

Dr. Kathleen Toomey, Commissioner of Public Health, related:

- The Georgia Public Health Lab currently has a 48-hour turnaround on coronavirus tests once the sample is received. However, private labs, which handle more tests are taking longer due to the volume being handled.
- The state has received two waivers from USDA allowing the WIC (Women, Children and Infants) program to both certify individuals and deliver vouchers by mail.
- The Department of Public Health is actively exploring opening the Gateway Customer portal to WIC to further alleviate the need for physical presences in WIC clinics.

Homer Bryson, Director, Georgia Emergency Management Agency/Homeland Security, reported:

- Law enforcement personnel are being supplied access to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) through coordinated efforts with local officials.
- GEMA officials have been working around the clock to identify all options for potential increased bed capacity. No options are off the table.
- There are (as of last Friday) 3,330 ER beds in GA. The number fluctuates daily.
- The number of ventilators was being inventoried at the time, but the state has placed an order for 1,200 additional units.
- Teams are working with academic experts, epidemiologists and data scientists to assemble predictive models for many different scenarios of virus spread. This modeling will include potential cases, potential deaths, potential bed utilization and help us plan for surge in our hospitals.
- The state has purchased several million masks and other PPE supplies. We have already distributed more than 600,000 masks, 1 million pairs of gloves, 750,000 surgical masks and countless other supplies.
- The state is working with University partners to augment the state's testing capabilities and by next week should be substantially ramped up to process test kits by next week.

National Guard Sent to Phoebe Putney

One of the world's cities hardest hit per capita by COVID-19 is Albany, GA. On Thursday, two teams of Georgia National Guard medical personnel arrived at Phoebe Putney Hospital to provide support for a beleaguered staff. A third team arrived Saturday. The total of 29 troops include a physician, several advanced practice providers and registered nurses and 20 EMTs. They brought five ventilators with them. In addition, 12 other teams have been organized to be dispersed as needed across the state. The teams were not preexisting within the guard, but have

been specially built to respond to the COVID-19 crisis at Georgia hospitals. Gov. Kemp put 2,000 troops on alert to be ready to deploy to COVID-19 hotspots.

Of note, Georgia National Guard Adjutant General Thomas Carden has been a member of the Georgia Board of Public Health since shortly after relieving his predecessor last year, who had also served on the Board. The close relationship between public health and Georgia's military has surely resulted in increased cooperation and response during this crisis. The Board of Health was created in 2011 as part of legislation former Rep. Mickey Channell of Greensboro, now deceased, pushed through the General Assembly moving Public Health from a Division within an umbrella agency to a stand-alone Department of government.

Here are relevant statistics from March 28 for Phoebe Putney Healthcare:

- Total Positive Results – 357
- Total Positive Deaths from Phoebe Main – 16
- Total Positive Deaths from Phoebe Sumter – 2
- Total Positive Patients in Phoebe Putney Memorial Hospital – 46
- Total Positive External Patients – 286
- Total Other Patients Awaiting Test Results – 1,495

Income Tax Filing Deadline Extended

Also last week, Gov. Kemp announced an extension of the deadline for filing and paying 2019 income taxes to July 15th, coinciding with a federal extension instituted by the IRS. Additionally, all vehicle registrations that expire between March 16 and May 14 have been extended through May 15, 2020. However, no extension was made for the filing, payment, or deposit of any other type of state tax, including employee withholding and sales tax, or for the filing of any state information returns.

Budget Woes Manifest

Given the delayed tax deadline and the general economic ramifications caused by the coronavirus, there will undoubtedly be a subsequent drop off in cash flow for the state. By Friday, House Speaker David Ralston went on Georgia Public Broadcasting's "Political Rewind" program and said the state may not be able to afford the teacher pay raise the Governor has pushed for, nor the income tax cut that House Republicans inserted into the FY21 budget. How the influx of cash from the federal government will mitigate those concerns remains to be calculated.

Watch for Your Ballot Request Form

Few aspects of life have not been affected by the Coronavirus crisis and voting is no exception. Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger announced Tuesday that all 6.9 million Georgia voters will

be mailed absentee ballot REQUEST forms for the May 19 primary (which replaces the original voting date). (Yes, this will add about \$13 million to the state's budget balancing woes.) Voters will have to return the ballot request form with their own 55-cent stamp and specify the type of primary ballot desired, Republican or Democrat. The state will then mail the voter the correct ballot, which will then need to be returned by mail in time to be RECEIVED on May 19.

State Sen. Nikema Williams, who chairs the State Democratic Party, praised Raffensperger's efforts to enhance distance voting, although she thinks ballots should be counted if they are "mailed" by May 19, instead of "received" by that date. Williams has special insight into such social distancing issues as one of five state senators who have tested positive for COVID-19. In-person voting will still take place, too, but Raffensperger has noted that many elderly poll workers have already resigned out of appropriate respect for the dangers COVID-19 presents to that age group. He is working with officials to beef up local poll-worker rosters. Speaker Ralston weighed in on the plan last week with a letter asking Raffensperger to delay the vote a second time, until at least June 23. The Secretary has said he will stick to his current plan, as a change of more than 45 days in the future would require legislative action.

Next Week

The Georgia General Assembly remains in suspension; therefore, no changes have been made to any bills so there is no tracking document in this week's report. We will continue to monitor other political developments.