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Weekly Legislative Report # 13

Week Ending April 10, 2020

COVID-19 persists in ravaging the state with Sunday's noon Department of [Public Health report](#) showing 433 dead and 2,505 testing positive. Hot spot Dougherty County continues to lead the state with 72 deaths, followed by Fulton County with 50. While Gov. Brian Kemp and state officials continue to announce various responses, some routine state business has been going forward as well. Last week Kemp published [12 Executive Orders](#), only five of which dealt with the coronavirus crisis. The others concerned routine procedures such as appointing new judges, setting a special election for a state senate vacancy, and transferring real property from one state agency to another.

Coronavirus Developments

The major new development in the pandemic wars was Kemp's announcement extending from April 13 to April 30 his shelter-in-place orders for Georgia's 10.6 million residents. He also made the tough political call to not absolutely prohibit church services, instead saying, "To all Georgians celebrating Easter this Sunday, I am pleading with you to not attend any services in person." Churches that hold services must still operate under the order to have congregants maintain six-foot separation. Current CDC advice is everyone should wear masks as well.

The Governor did tighten rules for the operation of senior care homes after officials revealed that 81 residents of such facilities across the state had died during the pandemic. He formally barred visitors and nonessential workers from nursing homes, restricted group meals in the homes and required that any employee testing positive be quarantined. The Department of Public Health released a list of [80 nursing homes](#) with COVID-19 outbreaks.

convention sites such as the World Congress Center and the Savannah Convention Center had been scouted as potential venues for emergency hospitals.

Unemployment Situation Exceeds Recession

On Thursday of last week the Georgia Department of Labor (GDOL) said it had processed 390,000 unemployment claims (UI) in the week ending April 4. That's more claims in seven days than in all of 2019. For further perspective, at the peak of the last great recession, the Department said nearly 500,000 Georgians were unemployed. In the past three weeks alone, 536,000 Georgians have contacted GDOL about their lost jobs.

Eventually, We'll Vote. Right?

Georgia's Presidential Primary was originally scheduled for March 24, but was postponed until May 19 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. That election has now been pushed back for a second time, to June 9, even though absentee ballot request forms have already been mailed out. Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger last week determined that Governor Brian Kemp's extension of his emergency powers (with the concurrence of House and Senate leaders) gave him the latitude to move the election beyond the 45-day maximum authorized in statute. As a sidebar, a suit has been filed asking the courts to rule that requiring voters to pay the postage on their absentee ballots is equivalent to being an illegal poll tax. (Should that case succeed, would absentee voters be eligible for a refund of the 55-cent stamp already used to return the absentee ballot request form? And, how many dollars would be required to process each refund check? Just wondering.)

Campaign Fundraising Fairness

The Georgia Government Transparency and Campaign Financing Commission (colloquially referred to as the Ethics Commission) has agreed to take a look at the question of legislators raising campaign funds during the time the General Assembly is in suspension. Current law forbids fundraising by serving members during the legislative session to avoid the appearance of quid pro quo between a contribution and a legislative vote. However, candidates challenging an incumbent have no such restriction. Thus, for once, incumbents feel at a disadvantage given the unprecedented length of this suspension. The Commission is expected to address the matter on Tuesday.

Revenues Up; Auto Accidents Down

Tax Revenues for the state went up in March in comparison to the same month a year ago – by 9.8%. While that's a terrific figure, officials still think that comparison will fall off the cliff next month thanks to the economic difficulties created by COVID-19. Overall, revenue stands at 2.1% ahead of last year at this time, a point less than projected.

Conversely, automobile accidents and traffic in general are both down since the pandemic hit home. Comparing March 2019 to last month, the state saw a 12.6% drop in highway deaths from 143 to 125. On March 11, the day the World Health Organization declared an official pandemic, traffic on Georgia's interstates dropped 44% from the same 2019 date. Similarly, traffic dropped 45% on non-interstate roads, but was down only 4% for trucks on all roads.

Of course, the other side of the coin is that sparsely traveled interstates become too tempting for frustrated NASCAR wannabes. Sandy Springs police report that 52 people were stopped for driving more than 100 mph on GA 400 and I-285 in just a three-week period. The accident rate on GA 400 remains about the same as before the pandemic, even though far fewer cars are on the road and while other thoroughfares have shown significant decreases. No wonder the proceeds from Super Speeder fines are directed to the Georgia Trauma Care Network Commission!

Jack Hill, Statesman

Flags were ordered flown at half-mast Friday to honor one of Georgia's most influential elected officials who died Monday while working at his home office desk. State Senator Jack Hill, 75, chaired the Senate Appropriations Committee since 2003 and exerted as much influence as anyone on how taxpayers' dollars would be spent. And, he did so in a modest, low-key, professional, thoughtful, well-researched manner. When advocates went to his office seeking funding for a favorite budget item, they learned to be well prepared. One needed to know the history of the line item, because Jack Hill certainly did, and be ready to explain why that particular taxpayer expenditure was truly needed.

Sen. Hill was the consummate public servant. In addition to nearly 30 years in the state senate, he had a 33-year career in the Georgia Air National Guard, serving as a Unit Commander and as Inspector General. He was a big supporter of public libraries and public health and was always looking out for rural Georgia. He was first in the state to introduce legislation allowing early voting, which eventually passed as part of a package reform bill. Hill had far too many other notable accomplishments to include in this space, but you can also consult his [obituary here](#) and official [senate bio here](#).

Most acknowledged his position as "Senator" or "Mr. Chairman," but he was just as happy to be called "Jack." We were honored to call him our friend, and we're confident that history will refer to him as "Statesman."

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