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Weekly Legislative Report #19

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A Troubling Development

As of this past week nine children in Georgia have been confirmed to be stricken with a mysterious new condition that public health officials believe is linked to COVID-19. Called MIS-C for Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children, it appears to be a rare, but frightening diagnosis, with symptoms that include prolonged fever, body rash, reddening or peeling on palms and feet, abdominal pain, and vomiting or diarrhea. The link to COVID-19 is not clear but early indications point to the coronavirus triggering the natural immune system to overreact causing widespread inflammation. All of Georgia's patients have survived and returned home, but three children in New York have died from the condition.

Unemployment Remains an Issue

Georgia's unemployment level broke an all-time record with an 11.9% rate in April. About 580,000 Georgians were officially listed as jobless. Some people who have complained about not receiving their unemployment benefit checks may want to double-check their emails. According to Jill Nolin of the *Georgia Recorder*, there's a member of the Australian Labor Party who shares the name Mark Butler with Georgia's Department of Labor Commissioner. Apparently, at least a dozen or so emails meant to communicate with Georgia's Labor Commissioner have traveled through cyber space to the Labor Party's Mark Butler in Australia. It seems people researched an email address for Mark Butler and mistakenly used the address for the one from down under. The Aussies have been funneling them back to the Peach State. Folks, it's just been that kind of year!

Getting Ready for the Next School Year

Governor Brian Kemp has selected a 72-member group of government, educational and civic leaders to provide advice on how to re-start K-12 schools later this summer. The 180 school

districts in the state will make their own decisions about whether and how to reopen school buildings (unless a new executive order is issued), but the advisors will be divided into work groups to think through various challenges. The six areas of emphasis are: school meals, distance learning and teacher training, mental health and wellness, supplemental learning, facilities and busing, and access to the internet and computing devices.

Senate Budget Subcommittees to Meet

Schools along with most other departments of state government will come under scrutiny as the Senate begins holding appropriations subcommittee meetings next week. It appears the hearings may well be some combination of in-person and on-line meetings. We're in new territory here, but the word is the public is being encouraged to watch via live streaming. The public/lobbyists won't technically be barred from meetings, but rooms may reach maximum capacity after the first several visitors because doorkeepers will enforce social distancing. Some of the normal audience seating may be appropriated to enable legislators to adequately spread out.

State agencies submitted their proposals of how to best cut 14% from their budget last Wednesday. Numerous departments predict they will have to furlough employees as payroll is by far the largest part of their budgets. Restricting meetings and travel is often a budget reduction technique, but that process just doesn't come close to reaching the amount of reduced spending now necessary.

Major Traffic Bottleneck to Get Revamp

The nation's 25th worst traffic bottleneck is not necessarily something that makes it to a Chamber of Commerce's brag sheet. That's why it was good news last week when the state's Department of Transportation Board (GDoT) gave the green light to reworking the intersection where I-20 meets I-285 east of Atlanta. The project calls for reconstructing three ramps, adding new collector/distributor and auxiliary lanes, and replacing several bridges. Under the plan, GDoT will manage the project, but the State Road and Tollway authority will enter into a contract with private companies to design, construct and finance the work. However, don't expect to cruise the new lanes anytime soon. GDoT is expected to issue requests for qualifications this summer, select a short list of finalists in October, to be followed by two requests for proposals in November and January. Contracts would not be awarded until the third quarter of 2021, with completion of the project hoped for in 2025. Current projections are for a price range of \$350 to \$450 million.

Speaking of traffic, GDoT Commissioner Russell McMurry told Board members that traffic around the state is starting to pick up again. Commercial truck traffic was never down more than about 10% and has now completely returned to normal.

2020 Census Counts Lag

The census count does more than count. Ultimately, it distributes. It determines how much federal financial support is apportioned to communities for programs such as food stamps, housing vouchers, highway construction, child-care services, and special education to name a few. An individual community's share of these federal funds comes from a formula based on census data. Population, along with various demographics, determine how much federal money is distributed. And don't forget, census figures will also be used to draw new political boundaries for General Assembly and Congressional districts.

To date, only 56% of Georgia households have completed the census process. Georgia ranks 35th nationally in the percentage of residents who have completed the survey. As of last Friday, 32 counties, mostly in rural South Georgia, had a completion rate of less than 40%. As noted by Michele NeSmith, Director of Research and Policy Development for the Association County Commissioners of Georgia, "The counties with the worst response rates are the ones that need to have as accurate a count as possible." Expect to hear more about the census this summer as the state prepares a publicity push to overcome the effects social distancing has had on the count thus far.

COVID-19 Data

Gov. Brian Kemp and Department of Public Health (DPH) Commissioner Kathleen Toomey both said during a press conference that it was important to improve the accurate reporting of data.

Kemp said, "I just want people to know they can be confident in the data, but also, look, we're not perfect. We've made mistakes. When we do that, we'll own that, change it, and make sure that people are aware of that."

Comm. Toomey indicated that there are many sources of data associated with tracking COVID-19 cases and that the state has attempted to report such information quickly in an effort to be transparent. Toomey assured the public that "data integrity is our number one priority."

As of 9:00 a.m. Sunday, [DPH had recorded](#) 42,800 cases of COVID-19 with 1,823 deaths in the state. The most recent hotspot for the virus is reportedly in Hancock County with a total population of 8,500 people. It has recently reported 176 cases and 17 deaths (14 from a single nursing home).