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## **Weekly Legislative Report #22**

**Week Ending June 12, 2020**

Following a three-month break to dodge the spread of COVID-19, the Georgia General Assembly will reconvene on Monday for Day 30 of a session limited to 40 legislative days. Lawmakers will endeavor to function in an environment of strict social distancing protocols with state representatives spread out on the House floor, visitors' gallery and Appropriations hearing room. In the Senate, the Republican and Democratic caucuses have agreed to voluntarily minimize the number of their respective members on the floor at any one time. The presiding officers in each chamber have been given discretion to keep votes open until members have had time to walk from their offices to the floor. Interaction between legislators and the public will be minimized, with very little room for the public in hearing rooms. The [House will live-stream](#) floor debate, and all committee and subcommittee meetings. The [Senate will live-stream](#) floor debate and full committee meetings. Only 800 people will be allowed entry to the Capitol at one time, not counting members and staff. Temperature checks will be made at the entrance.

Complicating the legislators' return is a long-planned Monday morning demonstration in support of a hate-crimes bill that narrowly cleared the House before the break and is currently situated in the Senate Judiciary Committee. Interest in that bill will be influenced by the high profile death of Ahmaud Arbery in Brunswick and possibly inflamed by the more recent death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, plus Friday night's death of Rayshard Brooks at the hand of an Atlanta policeman. Georgia is one of four states without such legislation. Democrats also want to pass bills that modifying the state's citizen's arrest and stand-your-ground laws.

### **Abbreviated Session Threatens Many Bills**

The social distancing complications have led leadership to warn that not nearly as many bills as usual will be considered during the remaining days of session. For example, the 180 House members will vote individually by voice as the roll is called by a clerk. Those who don't vote the first time through will have their names called again on a second pass through the roll. It will not

be possible to run through numerous bills in a short time span. Some in leadership have implied that if they can get the budget done quickly, they may not even use all of the days allowed. The legislature's one must-do task is to complete an FY21 budget that balances against the Governor's official revenue estimate, something they have been working on for weeks. But, that task has evolved during the course of the pandemic break from a directive that state agencies plan for slashing their budgets by 14%, to asking the House and Senate to work with cuts of only 11% instead. Revenue enhancement bills may be another factor in play given the severity of cuts, furloughs and job losses forecast based on expected revenues.

Other bills that will likely be considered include a remedy to the problem of balance billing in healthcare, some type of pandemic-related liability protection for businesses that re-open to the public, and a bill tightening regulations on long-term care facilities. There will also be a push to finish work on a bill that would set a 50-cent fee on Uber-style ride shares and a resolution to extend the life of the Commission on Freight and Logistics for another year. Bills that are not a leadership priority, controversial or not, will struggle for recognition.

### **Election Day Generates Two Stories**

Last week's election generated two big stories – who won which race and how difficult it was to actually cast a ballot. As breakdowns in the voting process developed early and often, judges ordered that polling places should stay open past 7:00 p.m. in 20 Georgia counties as thousands of voters waited hours in line. Nearly every news story on the topic used the term “finger pointing” in explaining where the fault rested. Georgia's Secretary of State blamed the counties (specifically Fulton and DeKalb) for poor preparation. Counties (including the Cobb Co. Commission Chairman, a Republican) blamed the Secretary of State for inadequate training and lack of resource personnel when something mechanical went wrong. This was the first major election in which a new voting system composed of a computer tablet, touchscreen voting machine, printer and scanner, was used statewide. Additionally, more than one million people chose to vote via absentee ballot this time, and large counties were opening tens of thousands of paper ballots by hand in the days after the election. Everyone concerned declared that things absolutely have to go better in November.

The most significant statewide race was in the Democratic primary where Jon Ossoff won without a runoff in a field of seven candidates for the right to face Republican David Perdue for the U.S. Senate in November. [Runoffs will be needed](#) in the Republican races for the 9<sup>th</sup> (Matt Gurtler vs Andrew Clyde) and 14<sup>th</sup> (Marjorie Greene vs John Cowan) Congressional Districts. In the 7<sup>th</sup> District, Democrat Carolyn Bourdeaux appears to have won over five opponents without a runoff, clearing the 50% mark by 323 votes. It's not Bourdeaux's first close contest. She lost to current Republican Congressman Rob Woodall in the 2018 general election by 433 votes. Bourdeaux will face Rich McCormick on November's ballot. He captured the Republican mantle with 55% over six competitors. Woodall did not seek reelection.

### **Governor Relaxes Restrictions Further**

Gov. Brian Kemp further loosened pandemic restrictions in an [executive order](#) released Thursday. The new order permits groups up to 50 to meet without social distancing requirements and removes any restriction on the number of people per square foot in a restaurant. Bars can serve up to 50 people at a time or 35% of their listed fire capacity, whichever is greater. Live performance venues may reopen beginning July 1 if they conform to specific criteria. Mandatory requirements for operating non-critical businesses and other organizations were extended through June 30. The [DPH's Coronavirus count](#) as of Sunday noon was 56,801 cases with 2,446 deaths.