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**Weekly Legislative Report #1**

**Week Ending January 13, 2023**

Week one of the 2023 Georgia General Assembly began with a UGA National Championship football victory Monday night and continued through Governor Brian Kemp’s Second Inauguration ceremonies and Inaugural Ball on Thursday (entertainment by country music star Luke Bryan).

Other constitutional officers were sworn in during the same formalities, including Lt. Governor Burt Jones, Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, Attorney General Chris Carr, Agriculture Commissioner Tyler Harper, Insurance and Safety Fire Commissioner John King, State School Superintendent Richard Woods, and Labor Commissioner Bruce Thompson. To accommodate a large crowd, the inauguration ceremonies were held at Georgia State University’s Convocation Center just blocks from the Capitol. (Almost where Hank Aaron hit number 715!)

Contemplating his second term, Kemp promised to focus on economic development and workforce housing and to “keep our foot on the gas by bringing good paying jobs and greater opportunity to every corner of the Peach state.”

“We will ensure that our kids have the resources they need to overcome learning loss and find success in the classroom instead of teaching them what to think,” he said. “We will leverage state resources to support law enforcement, toughen penalties for criminals, crack down on human trafficking, and use every tool at our disposal to keep your family safe.”

Kemp also released his recommendations for both the [FY Amended 2023 and FY 2024 budgets](https://opb.georgia.gov/budget-information/budget-documents/governors-budget-reports) on Friday. He is proposing $2,000 raises for school teachers and state employees, along with $1.1 billion to increase the state’s Quality Basic Education (QBE) funding formula and $61 million to ensure the HOPE scholarship pays 100% of tuition costs. In addition, he is proposing a one-time $1.1 billion tax relief grant for homeowners who pay property taxes to local governments, complemented by a $1 billion state income tax rebate. The tax relief would come from a huge $6.6 billion budget surplus the state has accrued in recent years. As promised, Kemp’s budget also puts $1.1 billion of surplus funds back into GDoT’s coffers in FY 23 to replace the taxes lost when he suspended Georgia’s 29-cent per gallon excise tax on motor fuels for nine months. The move will keep state highway construction on schedule.

Other spending priorities in the $32.5 billion FY 24 budget include $130 million to train workers with a view to a burgeoning electric mobility industry, plus millions more spread out over public safety agencies to fund a new radio communications system and to repair, maintain and expand corrections facilities.

The Governor is recommending $166 million for the Regional Economic Business Assistance (REBA) program to assist local governments in providing incentives to support business development. He is also requesting to shift $35.7 million in existing reserves within the OneGeorgia program to establish the Rural Workforce Housing Fund. The intent is to help local authorities prepare land for housing to support the labor force needed for major new economic development projects.

**New Legislative Leaders**

And, while Governor Kemp was sworn in for his second term, the top two legislative leaders were sworn in for their first terms atop the General Assembly. Rep. Jon Burns (R-Newington) became the state’s 75th Speaker of the House, replacing Jan Jones, who in her role as Speaker Pro Tem automatically moved up to Speaker for seven weeks following the death of long-time Speaker David Ralston. Newly elected Lt. Governor Burt Jones (no relation) took over as the presiding officer in the Senate. Jones is only the state’s 13th Lt. Governor as the office was created during a 1945 Constitutional revision. The first LG, eventual Governor Melvin Thompson, took office in 1947.

These leaders will be managing the most diverse group of legislators in the state’s history. There are now 83 non-white members and 81 women legislators.

In the Senate, the Democrats gained one seat in the last election, but the Republicans still hold a 33-23 majority. Keep in mind that to pass a bill, senators need at least 29 votes. The Dems gained two seats in the House, leaving Republicans with a 101-79 majority in a body that requires 91 favorable votes to pass a bill.

There are 10 new members in the Senate and 43 new members in the House -- a 22.5% turnover rate (although four of that number either served in previous years or got elected to a different chamber).

**Committee Chairs**

If you’re looking to get something done during the legislative session, there’s not a list much more important than who serves as committee chairs. The Senate released its list on Friday, and it includes a newly-created Children and Families Committee to be headed by Kay Kirkpatrick, MD (R-Marietta). Note that two of the chairs are Democrats!

* Sen. Russ Goodman (R-Cogdell) chair of Agriculture and Consumer Affairs
* Sen. Blake Tillery (R-Vidalia) chair of Appropriations
* Sen. Carden Summers (R-Cordele) chair of Banking and Financial Institutions
* Sen. Kay Kirkpatrick (R-Marietta) chair of Children and Families (New Cmte.)
* Sen. Brandon Beach (R-Alpharetta) chair of Economic Development and Tourism
* Sen. Clint Dixon (R-Buford) chair of Education and Youth
* Sen. Max Burns (R-Sylvania) chair of Ethics
* Sen. Chuck Hufstetler (R-Rome) chair of Finance
* Sen. Marty Harbin (R-Tyrone) chair of Government Oversight
* Sen. Ben Watson (R-Savannah) chair of Health and Human Services
* Sen. Billy Hickman (R-Statesboro) chair of Higher Education
* Sen. Larry Walker (R-Perry) chair of Insurance and Labor
* Sen. Colton Moore (R-Trenton) chair of Interstate Cooperation
* Sen. Brian Strickland (R-McDonough) chair of Judiciary
* Sen. Lee Anderson (R-Grovetown) chair of Natural Resources and the Environment
* Sen. John Albers (R-Alpharetta) chair of Public Safety
* Sen. Shelly Echols (R-Alto) chair of Reapportionment and Redistricting
* Sen. Bill Cowsert (R-Athens) chair of Regulated Industries and Utilities
* Sen. Rick Williams (R-Milledgeville) chair of Retirement
* Sen. Matt Brass (R-Newnan) chair of Rules
* Sen. Chuck Payne (R-Dalton) chair of Science and Technology
* Sen. Ed Harbison (D-Columbus) chair of State Institutions and Property
* Sen. Frank Ginn (R-Danielsville) chair of State and Local Governmental Operations
* Sen. Greg Dolezal (R-Cumming) chair of Transportation
* Sen. Donzella James (D-Atlanta) chair of Urban Affairs
* Sen. Mike Dugan (R-Carrollton) chair of Veterans, Military, and Homeland Security

Senate Minority leadership includes:

Minority Leader – Gloria Butler (D-Stone Mt.)

Minority Whip – Harold Jones (D-Augusta)

Caucus Chair – Elena Parent (D-Atlanta)

Senate Majority leadership includes:

President Pro Tem – John Kennedy (R-Macon)

Majority Leader – Steve Gooch (R-Dahlonega)

Majority Whip – Randy Robertson (R-Cataula)

Caucus Chair – Jason Anavitarte (R-Dallas)

The full list has not yet been released on the House side, but we know that then-Speaker Jan Jones appointed Matt Hatchett (R-Dublin) as Chairman of the Appropriations Committee in early December. In addition, Speaker Jon Burns recently announced a newly-created Health Oversight Committee to be led by Rep. Butch Parrish (R-Swainsboro).

House Minority leadership includes:

Minority Leader – James Beverly (D-Macon)

Minority Whip – Sam Park (D-Lawrenceville)

Caucus Chair – Billy Mitchell (D-Stone Mt.)

House Majority leadership includes:

Speaker Pro Tem – Jan Jones (R-Milton)

Majority Leader – Chuck Efstration (R-Dacula)

Majority Whip – James Burchett (R-Waycross)

Caucus Chair – Bruce Williamson (R-Monroe)

**Statistic of the Week**

State net tax collections in December totaled nearly $3.21 billion, up 7.5% compared to December 2021. Personal income tax collections were down, but corporate taxes and sales taxes helped to overcome that decrease. [Details here](https://gov.georgia.gov/press-releases).

**Mental Health Reform On the Way**

Currently, in many parts of the state, access to mental health treatment is hard to find. Kevin Tanner is a former state representative who was recently named Commissioner of the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities. He’s called this the “Decade of Mental Health Reform.” He’s also been serving as the Chair of the influential Behavioral Health Reform and Innovation Commission (BHRIC). The Commission has recently issued its [2022 Annual Report](https://georgiarecorder.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Annual-Report-2022-BHRIC_FINAL_Full-Report.pdf) containing 23 specific recommendations. Advocates can be expected at the very least to push forward legislation to increase compliance with existing federal laws that require mental health access be treated the same as for physical health issues. Gov. Kemp’s budget recommendations includes $19 million for new mental health crisis intervention and care projects.

**Education Funding Reform**

Another summer study committee’s work may result in education-related legislation this session. Led by Sen. Mike Dugan (R-Carrollton), the Senate Study Committee to Revise Education Funding Mechanisms took a deep dive into that issue. Georgia’s current Quality Basic Education formula, known as QBE, was put in place while Ronald Reagan was president. The current formula calculates funding to local school systems based on student counts and type of program.

Georgia currently allocates about $11 billion for K-12 education, which amounts to more than a third of the $30 billion state budget. Nonetheless, Georgia ranks 38th nationally in per-pupil spending and received a “D” grade from the Education Law Center. The Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education says Georgia is one of only six states that does not give schools extra money to deal with poverty.

**Occupational Licensing Reform**

A third off-season task force has been studying occupational licensing reform. Led by bipartisan co-chairs Sen. Brian Strickland (R-McDonough) and Rep. Patty Bentley (D-Butler), the committee has questioned the strict standards that don’t allow many Georgians with an arrest record to obtain an occupational license – a license that could allow them to become productive tax-paying citizens.

The Georgia Justice Project has said a criminal record shouldn’t always be held against someone who is otherwise qualified to perform a job. “The mere fact that someone has an arrest on their record can sometimes be enough to disqualify them,” according to Executive Director Doug Ammar. Expected legislation will aim to create clear guidelines regarding how long ago or how severe the offense was and whether it impacts a person’s ability to work in a particular industry, Ammar said.

**Mining Is Manufacturing**

Construction and highway contractors use aggregate (aka gravel) to create a sturdy base for their projects. But the correct size and hardness of the stone is critical to the success of every job. GDoT issues very detailed specifications for aggregate when building a highway. These sizes of stone are not taken out of the ground that way; rather, large blocks are broken, crushed, sifted and sized; i.e., “manufactured” to meet such specifications. Thus, the Georgia Construction Aggregate Assn. is supporting [HB 34](https://www.legis.ga.gov/legislation/63528) this session to add mining to the list of industries eligible for an existing manufacturing and telecommunications investment tax credit. A major investment in property or equipment is required, and a detailed application must be approved by the Georgia Department of Revenue.

**We Have a Schedule**

For the first time ever, the General Assembly has passed SR 6, [a resolution](https://www.legis.ga.gov/legislation/63484) during the first week laying out the meeting schedule for the entire session. Crossover Day has been set for March 6, while adjournment sine die is slated for March 29th. There are no Friday sessions on the remaining schedule, and only a single Friday (March 3rd) is listed as a committee work day. Of course, the meeting calendar can always be changed with a simple resolution passed by both houses, but this schedule is a real quality-of-life improvement, especially for members who face a three to four-hour drive between home and the Capitol.

**Next Week**

The legislature will have no formal legislative sessions next week. As is custom, MLK Day will be observed on Monday, then the House and Senate Appropriations Committees will hold joint hearings on the Governor’s proposed budgets Tuesday through Thursday. [Click here](https://www.legis.ga.gov/schedule/house/AQIARgAAAxpEc5CqZhHNm8gAqgAvxFoJAGeQLC1kSDdIixjC7EHFmfIAAAJaYAAAANZQGGA2fqFiaHBHrewZqJ2eET4AAtOCHWkAAAAuAAADGkRzkKpmEc2byACqACGGA2fEWgMAZ5AsLWRIN0iLGMLsQcWZ8gAAAlpgAAAA) for the budget testimony schedule and to live stream the hearings.

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