



The 2010 session of the Georgia General Assembly that begins on January 11 promises to be a very interesting one. Since last session, a number of seats have been vacated by those seeking higher office or by those looking to move from one chamber to the other. Therefore, the number of familiar faces will be down significantly this year.

Currently, 50 bills have been pre-filed prior to the beginning of session. These will be among the first assigned to committee when the session begins. Bills that were introduced last year but did not receive final action will also have the opportunity to be acted upon in 2010.

As always, GFA will be on the ground at the Capitol every day during session. The status of legislation of importance will be reported to GFA members at least once each week during the session, in addition to legislative ‘calls for action’ whenever grassroots action from the forestry community is needed quickly on an issue. In the interest of time – yours especially - we will report only on those bills which we are actively working or which appear to have momentum.

Legislature to focus on budget in 2010

Many legislators are saying the upcoming session will be about three things: budget, water, and transportation.

Leaders in both the Georgia State Senate and House of Representatives predict that legislators could be forced early next year to cut state spending by an additional \$400 million. “We’re somewhat like a home where we’ve lost one of our incomes and yet we’re still spending at a high level,” Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman **Jack Hill** (R-Reidsville) told a business group in early December. “We have used the piggy bank and the money under the mattress.”

Recently, Governor Sonny Perdue ordered \$900 million in additional cuts, including three-day furloughs for state workers. Cuts above the \$900 million could result in additional furlough days for more than 250,000 state employees.

Other issues in the works are plans to identify funding a safe and efficient transportation system for the state, developing regional plans for maintaining Georgia’s water supply, and property tax reform.

House chooses new leadership

After weeks filled with rumors and speculation, the Republican Caucus of the Georgia House of Representatives met on December 17 to vote for the new Speaker of the House. **David Ralston**, a former state Senator and current State Representative from Blue Ridge, won by a narrow margin over **Rep. Larry O’Neal** (R-Bonaire) and will replace outgoing **Speaker Glenn Richardson** who resigned his position on January 1. It is expected that Ralston will be voted in by the full House of Representatives when it reconvenes on January 11.

In addition to electing a new Speaker, the caucus also voted for a new Speaker Pro Tem (the number two position being vacated by **Rep. Mark Burkhalter**, R-Johns Creek) and a new Majority Whip (vacated by **Rep. Jan Jones**, R-Alpharetta). Jones was selected as the new Speaker Pro Tem, while **Rep. Ed Lindsey** (R-Atlanta) will take over as Whip. **Rep. Jerry Keen** (R-St. Simons) will remain in his position as Majority Leader.

For some, the new House leadership signals a change in the way the House has been run in the past. Ralston is seen by many lawmakers and former colleagues as the right person to replace Richardson. Whereas Richardson was viewed as being tough to work with and unwilling to reach across the aisle, many see Ralston as being conciliatory and more apt to work in a bipartisan manner. Ralston is considered one of the more moderate Republicans in the caucus on social issues even though he represents conservative north Georgia.



Rep. David Ralston

Ralston: No tax increases to balance budget

State **Rep. David Ralston**, Georgia's next Speaker of the House, says that taxes will not be increased to balance the state's budget in 2010. With unemployment in Georgia soaring above 10 percent, Ralston says that raising taxes would be "counterproductive".

In order to accommodate a budget shortfall in excess of \$1 billion, Ralston says Georgia should expect deep cuts. "We'll be looking at what state government is doing that maybe it doesn't need to be doing", he said. Ralston also says that he would like to evaluate current tax breaks given to particular businesses and industries and evaluate the economic benefit they've provided for the state. Members of the Georgia Forestry Association, in particular those on the manufacturing side, could be impacted. It's possible that GFA will spend significant energy defending those tax credits during session.

Final recommendations submitted by Water Task Force

Earlier this year, Governor Sonny Perdue created the Water Contingency Task Force, made up of business, government and environmental leaders from around the state, tasking them with developing an approach to deal with the ruling from the tri-state water wars case ruling. The federal ruling, ordered by Senior US District Judge Paul Magnuson, says that it is illegal for the US Army Corps of Engineers to draw water from Lake Lanier to meet the needs of metro Atlanta and its 3.5 million residents. The task force presented its final recommendations to the Governor on December 22 for creating a contingency plan to address Georgia's water issues if the ruling remains in effect in 2012.

"We believe in a three part strategy - conserve, capture and control," said John Brock, chairman and CEO of Coca-Cola Enterprises and co-chair of the Water Contingency Task Force. "There's no single magic solution. We must conserve more water, capture the water we do receive, and control our water supplies through progressive water policies."

The final report reaffirms the gap cannot be closed between the water Georgia has and the water it needs by 2012 under the reduced withdrawals called for in the judge's ruling. As Governor Perdue has said, using Lake Lanier for water supply is our most cost-effective and environmentally friendly option. The task force found that if given additional time past the 2012 deadline, more options become available. These additional contingency options can be implemented by 2015 and 2020. Emergency solutions are extremely costly, but having a few more years gives more and better choices should the judge's ruling stand.

Rogers & Lindsey: major property tax reform needed



Sen. Chip Rogers

Two Republican lawmakers will make property tax reform a priority in the upcoming session. **Senator Chip Rogers** (R-Woodstock) and **Rep. Ed Lindsey** (R-Atlanta) have both expressed the need for a change in the way property taxes in the state are assessed.

Rogers is the chairman of the Senate Property Tax Assessment and Appeals Study Committee, which has proposed a package that includes completely overhauling the appeals system; eliminating property tax returns; and allowing the property owner's value to stand in arbitration if the county does not respond within 45 days.

Sen. Rogers is a proponent of doing away with the property tax system altogether, but at this time there is not enough support for such radical change. His proposals have been drafted into legislation and were on the agenda for the study committee meeting earlier this week.



Rep. Ed Lindsey

For two years, Rep. Lindsey has proposed to eliminate assessments and base values strictly on sales. In the absence of a sale, tax values would increase based on inflation. "We need to move to a system that's based on the investment in the property, not the perceived value," Lindsey said. In 2010, Lindsey will once again push a bill that prevents counties from cherry picking properties to reassess the value.

GFA will report more on this story during session as it develops.

Brian Kemp to replace Handel as SOS

Governor Sonny Perdue has picked former State Senator Brian Kemp to replace Karen Handel as interim Secretary of State. Kemp is also one of three candidates campaigning for the job full time in November. Handel resigned her position in December to run for governor.

"I have known Brian for several years, and he has shown a strong dedication and commitment to public service," Governor Perdue said. "His leadership abilities and integrity will be a great asset to Georgia and the Secretary of State's office."

Kemp served in the Georgia State Senate from 2002 to 2006. He served in key committee leadership roles including Chair of Public Safety & Homeland Security, Vice-Chair of Higher Education, and Secretary of Agriculture & Consumer Affairs. He also served as a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee. Kemp is also involved in Plantation Partners LLC, a group of eight businessmen who own 358 acres along the Broad River in Madison County. Plantation Partners was named the 2009 Georgia Tree Farmer of the Year at GFA's annual meeting in Savannah last July.

"I greatly appreciate the Governor's confidence and am honored to serve the people of Georgia in this vital office," Kemp said. "I will continue the honorable tradition of leadership demonstrated by Karen Handel, Cathy Cox, Lewis Massey, and others before them. I am eager to get started and deliver for the people of Georgia." The Secretary of State's Office incorporates business and oversees professional licensing boards and elections.

February 2 & 3 - Forestry Day at the Capitol

Mark your calendars – GFA’s Annual Legislative Reception and Forestry Day at the Capitol will be held on February 2 & 3 in Atlanta.

The Winter Board of Directors meeting will be held at the Omni Hotel at the CNN Center from 1 – 4pm on Tuesday, February 2. The legislative reception will follow at 5pm in the Empire Room of the Sloppy Floyd Building’s West Tower (located next to the Capitol). On February 3, a breakfast meeting will be held at the Omni at 8am followed by Capitol visits from 9:30 – 11:30am.

For more information including how to register, visit GFA’s web page at www.gfagrow.org.

For more information on the Georgia General Assembly, including contact information for your Representative and Senator, visit the Georgia Forestry Association website at www.gfagrow.org and click on Georgia General Assembly under the **Links** tab, or under the **Government Affairs** tab you may go to Contact Your Legislator, a particularly helpful resource if you are uncertain of the members in your local legislative delegation.

For specific questions, please contact
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