



Capitol View

State Representative Billy Mitchell

August 2003

Mitchell legislation making a difference

At the request of Secretary of State Cathy Cox, I handled legislation that now enables voters to vote early by going to their local board of elections up to five days before an election! This landmark legislation will go a long way in making the voting process more convenient (while also providing a means of reducing

Election Day lines) and less costly, as additional voting machines will not have to be purchased.



I have also proposed legislation that would deal with some of the more pressing issues facing

our community. For instance, throughout the 61st district, overcrowding of our schools and congestion on our roads are the norm. Despite, the best projections of the Board of Education and Department of Transportation, at present, they really have no consistently accurate way of quantifying the numbers until they are there, and then we are reacting to the problems. I have proposed legislation that upon being permitted to build homes, the County must then notify the local school board and DOT, so that they can plan adequately for the impending increased traffic on our roads and demands on the school system.

At present the law is such that, if you are convicted of child molestation, you are precluded from visiting locations that children frequent, i.e., parks and playgrounds. I maintain that the law should be consistent with those who have been convicted of selling drugs to children 16 and under. It makes no sense to me to have a felon released from incarceration and is able to immediately return to the same population he was convicted of

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Rep. Billy Mitchell and Secretary of State Cathy Cox discuss legislation, handled by Rep. Mitchell in the House of Representatives, to enable voters to cast their ballots up to five days before an election, making the voting process more convenient and less costly.

Changes seen in legislative leadership

The 2003 legislative session got under way with new leaders in the state House of Representatives, the state Senate and the Governor's Office. In the House, Rep. Terry Coleman (D-Eastman) was elected as speaker, succeeding former Rep. Tom Murphy, who had held the leadership post for 28 years.

I was pleased to have been appointed by Speaker Coleman to the powerful Health & Human Services Committee, the State Planning & Community Affairs Committee (which considers legislation concerning the state's cities and counties), as well as being appointed as secretary of the Congressional & Legislative Reapportionment Committee, which is history making in that I am among the first

legislators to serve in a leadership capacity on a standing committee in their first term. I am also the first freshman legislator to serve on a legislative oversight committee, after being appointed to the State Recreation Authority, which provides legislative oversight for Stone Mountain Park, among other state facilities.

While it is a privilege to serve in a position of influence on major state issues, I realize my first responsibility is to represent the 61st District and the residents of DeKalb and Gwinnett counties at the State Capitol. I am honored by the trust you have shown in electing me as your representative, and I thank you for the opportunity to serve.

Lengthy session handles budget challenge key issues

The 2003 session of Georgia General Assembly, the longest in more than a century, began January 13 and finally adjourned April 25 as lawmakers dealt with a number of tough issues. Foremost among these was the responsibility of balancing the state budget despite a shortfall of more than \$600 million in state revenue caused by the sluggish economy of the past year.

The \$16 billion budget for fiscal year 2004 reflects a combination of more than \$1 billion in spending cuts and an economic stimulus and tax policy that will improve Georgia's economy and, on the whole, reduce state taxes.

As a part of the package, we will begin to phase out the state income taxes on our seniors' retirement income beginning in 2006, and the popular Back-to-School Sales Tax Holiday was revived.

Despite my opposition to any tax increases, a tobacco tax increase of 25 cents per pack of cigarettes was approved by the General Assembly to provide an estimated \$180 million in new revenue.

Other important issues considered by the General Assembly this year were:

Indigent defense. The House and Senate agreed on legislation that I co-sponsored, which would create a system for providing legal assistance to indigent criminal defendants. Under this measure, public defenders will be appointed by local councils in most of Georgia's judicial circuits.

New state flag. The state flag issue was one that generated a great deal of media attention and contentious debate in the legislative chambers. The legislation that finally passed both the House and Senate would replace the current flag,

adopted in 2001, with a banner similar to the pre-1956 flag upon the governor's signature. The bill also calls for a non-binding referendum next March in which voters would choose between those two flags.

Predatory lending. The original Georgia Fair Lending Act, which took effect last October, had a provision in it that caused Standard & Poors to declare it would not rate bonds tied to home mortgages in Georgia. Banking industry experts said that action could have a devastating effect on the availability of loans in Georgia, and it would leave no options for people with less-than-perfect credit. To alleviate this situation, legislation was approved that limits liability exposure only to so-called predatory lenders who generate the original loan.

Legislation ... *Continued from front*

victimizing. This bill, which is pending in committee, will certainly address some of the frustration being faced by our law enforcement and is my way of protecting our most vulnerable citizens – our kids.

I'm also working on legislation that would make it easier and quicker to condemn abandoned property so that communities may rid themselves of such nuisances and not risk the community's health, safety or property values. More information to come soon!

In keeping with my belief that our government works best when its citizens

are involved, I will be making it easier for you to do just that. I have opened a Legislative Office within the district, in which constituents may be able to call or conveniently come to, when seeking assistance. The office, which will be open year-round, will have its grand opening soon. To this end, I would certainly appreciate hearing from you on issues you feel are important. Whether it is on impending legislation, navigating through the state bureaucracy or any other matter to which you feel I may be of assistance, please feel free to contact me!

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