

11 January 2010

LWVAF Weekly Report, What to Expect

The Georgia General Assembly convened on Monday, January 11. The state constitution dictates that the second Monday in January shall be the first day of each legislative session.

Day 1 is both ceremonial and organizational. New members are sworn in. There will be three new senators with a fourth not yet chosen and six new representatives with two yet to be elected. This is the second year of a two year General Assembly, and in most of these 'year 2's', the chambers proceed as if there had not be much of an intersession.

But 2010 will be different in the House. Both the House Speaker and the Speaker Pro Temp offices have been vacated. The current Majority Whip is running for Speaker Pro Temp, so there will be a new Majority Whip. Day 1 will include elections for the open leadership positions. It is almost universal that these offices go to those nominated by the majority party, nevertheless, the election must take place among the entire membership of the chamber. The Senate will continue with its leadership from 2009.

With a new speaker there may be a change in some chairmanships. There may also be a change in some House Rules. The chairmanships are by Speaker appointment. Changes in House Rules require a vote of the full chamber. Rules of the House or Senate are like bylaws, dry reading but very vital to keeping order. They may be amended during the session through a resolution or set aside by majority vote for a particular situation. The rule books are available for each chamber in the offices of the House Clerk or Secretary of the Senate and are posted on line at the respective web sites, www.legis.ga.gov

During the first calendar week, often on Wednesday, the Governor will present his budget message to a joint session of both chambers, either during the morning general session or in the evening for greater access by the TV viewing audience. This will be the first day that citizens can get a copy of the governor's amendments to the current budget, FY10, and the proposed full year budget, FY11. It is expected that each will contain more cuts, as state tax revenues are not meeting expectations. The budget documents, which can be lengthy, will be posted on the web site of the Office of Planning and Budget, www.opb.ga.gov.

The second calendar week, with the MLK holiday, is a recess week and will be used for joint Appropriations Committees hearings on the newly presented budgets. With the additional information dispensed by the agency heads during these hearings, LWVAF begins writing about the specifics in the budgets. The public press may have already published articles on it as well. Read all sources for a better and wider examination of the contents. The FY10 budget is known as the mid year budget, the supplemental, the amended, the little budget because it is changing the full year budget adopted in the 2009 session. The FY11 is known as the full year budget, the big budget, or simply, next year's budget.

Another joint session within the first 10 legislative days will be held to hear a report from the Judiciary branch.

The white picture books showing all the legislators with their home and capitol addresses and committee assignments will not be available until mid February. Until then, use the copy from the 2009 session, and update for the seats filled by special election from the legislative web site. The full book is at www.legis.ga.gov , go to the bottom of the home page and click on Picture Book. It is a .pdf file and about 140 pages long.

Daily, Georgia Public Broadcasting televises the sessions and many of the committee hearings. These are available on line at www.gpb.org. Also GPTV will air a program on each legislative day. In metro Atlanta, that is on Channel 8 at 7 p.m. One person cannot be everywhere, but those cameras are. One tip: If the carpet in the chamber is red, the camera is in the House; if blue, in the Senate; and if sage green, in the Appropriations room. Tip 2: if the name tag is blue, it is a Senator and if it is red, it is a House member.

During the session, each member is entitled to submit legislation for consideration, known as “dropping a bill into the hopper”. The hopper is a wooden box on the Speaker’s rostrum in the House. The Senate has both a wooden box at the dais in the chamber and a file folder in the Secretary of the Senate’s Office. New legislation will be given a number, unless it was prefiled and already had a number.

New legislation is ‘read’ to the entire chamber by the Clerk or the Secretary. The presiding officer then assigns the bill to a committee. ‘Reading’ a bill is a process inherited from the British Parliament and used in our colonial legislatures. It provided notice to members of proposed legislation, many of whom were not literate. Today, reading serves the same purposes --- notifying all that the bill exists and is available for consideration by the chamber. The entire bill is not read, only the description at the beginning of the bill. The reading is usually done at a very fast pace and often cannot be heard distinctly. Those in need of that information may wish to pick up a printed copy of the First Reader report available after the close of the session. A Proposed First Reader report exists as a separate document in the Senate. The House puts its proposed first readers on its Composite report. Composites and First Readers are on line at www.legis.ga.gov.

A second reading is made in the House the following day and in the Senate after it has emerged from committee. The third reading is done on the day and immediately prior to the full chamber taking up the bill in floor debate.

This report will contain those bills introduced in which LWVAF has an interest and the committee to which it was assigned. Each bill will be reported again when it has emerged from committee, and again if it reaches the floor for debate and the outcome. On or about Day 20, the LWVAF will no longer report new legislation introduced because it has almost no chance of passage this session.

The House always introduces more legislation than the Senate, because it has more than three times the membership, 180 and 56 respectively. In Georgia, there is no limit to the number of bills any legislator can introduce. It will become evident, as the reports accumulate, that some lawmakers file many bills, others few, and some not at all. And there tends to be a specialization in the subject matter.

LWV reports on bills because of their subject matter, not their sponsor. When LWV has a position on the subject matter, it is so noted. LWV also reports bills on which it has no position that may be of interest to citizens.

The legislature meets for as many as 40 days, and there exist guidelines in chamber Rules to manage the legislation for that period. 'Days' means legislative days, which excludes recess days and usually weekend days. Resolutions about the scheduled meeting days, the calendar, are adopted as needed throughout the session. Legislators may gather on any day for committee hearings. Votes usually are not final on non-legislative days but can be reaffirmed on a subsequent legislative day.

Bills relative to changes in revenues, tax bills, must be introduced by Day 20 to be considered for passage this year.

Day 30 is Crossover day. Bills not having passed the chamber of origin by the end of this day are not eligible for consideration by the second chamber for this legislative session. Those which fail to cross over in this second year of the term, die under that bill number. Remember, however, that the purpose of a bill can pass attached to another bill still under consideration. A legislative 'thought' or idea never dies, even if a bill does.

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Feel free to contact the author about any report posted or any position the organization takes; ditto for any officer of the local unit.

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