Historic Session Adjourns Sine Die

 General Assembly addresses significant challenges during longest session since 1880s

GEORGE RAY
GOVERNMENT & COMMUNITY RELATIONS

As the General Assembly’s gavels dropped near midnight on Thursday night, their raps marked the end of a session not soon to be forgotten by those within earshot of the Gold Dome. Though most notably unique in its length, the 2010 session could also be remembered for how legislators disposed of, positively or negatively, a thunderstorm of challenges that enveloped the spring.

When the House and Senate completed Legislative Day 40 and adjourned sine die (without another planned meeting), legislators made a quantifiable entry into the record books. LD 40, which took 110 calendar days to reach, fell later than in any Georgia legislative session in more than 120 years.

Legislature Supports GT & USG Priorities

GT capital projects, USG growth and capital improvement requests receive favorable consideration

GOVERNMENT & COMMUNITY RELATIONS

In a legislative session defined by fiscal uncertainty, lawmakers took until the final day of the session to come to a consensus on a budget for FY2011. Passed by both chambers late Thursday, the budget gives favorable consideration to Georgia Tech and the University System of Georgia (USG) in a year when almost every agency will see funding cuts.

At the top of Georgia Tech’s budget priority list was $7 million in bond funding to complete and equip the Clough Undergraduate Learning Commons. The General Assembly included full funding in the budget to finish the project.

Tech also advocated for increases in allocations to the USG that would be spread among the system’s institutions. The General Assembly allocated $113 million in response to an original request of $139.8 million in Formula Funds for day to day operations. The legislature also approved funding of a Major Repair and Rehabilitation request of $75 million at $60 million.

Georgia Tech’s second capital budget priority was for construction of the EcoCommons water relocation project. The General Assembly allocated $300,000 for the project to cover

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LEGISLATIVE WRAP-UP

Now that the General Assembly has adjourned sine die, here is a look at where provisions we have watched this session ended up:

HB947: FY2010 Supplemental Appropriations Act ........................................................................................................... Passed; Awaits Governor’s Signature
Known as the FY2010 Amended budget, provides for the allocation of funds to state departments and agencies for the current fiscal year.

HB948: FY2011 General Appropriations Act ................................................................................................................... Passed; Awaits Governor’s Signature
Known as the FY2011 budget, provides for the allocation of funds to state departments and agencies for the next fiscal year.

HB1055: Fee Enhancements / Specialty License Plates .................................................................................................. Passed; Awaits Governor’s Signature
Allows USG institutions to designate part of specialty license plate revenues to go to a foundation for scholarships.

HB1128: Carry Forward Provision ................................................................................................................................... Passed; Awaits Governor’s Signature
Allows USG institutions to carry forward a small amount of funds from one fiscal year to the next.

HB1227: Sports Ticket Surcharge ..................................................................................................................................... Dead; Stalled in House Ways & Means
Places an additional tax on high school and college athletic ticket sales.

SB308: Concealed Carry Provision ................................................................................................................................... Passed; Awaits Governor’s Signature
Changes where permitted firearm carriers can carry their weapons in the state; maintains prohibition on college campuses.

SB496: Need-based HOPE Grant ....................................................................................................................................... Dead; Stalled in House Rules
Establishes a need-based grant program to assist needy college students with cost of attendance. Note: The FY2011 budget does include $15M for need-based aid that can be distributed at the discretion of the Georgia Student Finance Commission even without this measure.

PHOTOS: Session’s Final Days

Photos from the final days of the legislative session (clockwise, from top left): Senate President Pro Tem Tommie Williams and House Majority Leader Jerry Keen talk on the Speaker’s podium; House Appropriations Chairman Ben Harbin listens as a bill is presented; House Rules Chairman Bill Hembree poses for a photo with Olympic Bronze Medalist Elena Meyers; Speaker’s staff members Dianne Hardin and Spiro Amburn meet with Speaker Ralston on his podium; Senator Buddy Carter greets retiring Representative Burke Day; Representative Kathy Ashe, who represents Georgia Tech’s district, speaks from the House well. GEORGIA GENERAL ASSEMBLY
Concealed Carry Bill Passes, Goes to Governor

SB 308, the Senate’s proposal regarding concealed carry of weapons, passed out of the House Thursday. After both chambers agreed to a conference version around 11PM, the measure was forwarded to the governor for approval or veto.

Authored by Senator Mitch Seabaugh (R-Sharpsburg), SB 308 has been of particular interest to the University System throughout the session. In its original form, the legislation would have allowed the concealed carry of weapons on the campuses of colleges and universities. In current code, carrying a weapon on or within 1,000 feet of a college campus is a felony.

Though USG legal staff is still reviewing the bill, the measure seems to have largely maintained the illegality of weapons on campuses. However, it did appear to remove the 1,000 foot “buffer” and allow for licensed individuals to have a weapon in a vehicle parked on campus.

Governor Perdue now has until June 8th, 40 days from the session’s adjournment, to approve or veto the bill. It will automatically become law if no action is taken before the window expires.

View the summary and text of SB 308 online at http://tinyurl.com/gunBill.

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Initial design costs. This incremental approach was also taken on the CULC, which was funded in part by the state over three separate fiscal years and budgets.

“Though not all of our budget priorities were fully funded this year, we are pleased with the investments that the General Assembly has made in Tech and the USG,” said Dene Sheheane, Executive Director of Government and Community Relations. “The funding that has been committed will allow us to grow and position the Institute to help drive the state’s economic recovery.”

The FY2011 budget now follows the FY2010 Amended budget, which was agreed to by both chambers last week, to the Governor’s Office. Governor Perdue has until June 8th to approve or veto the budget. He also maintains the ability to veto individual line items.

Though the first four legislative priorities set by the Institute directly involved budget allocations, the final item on the list, while non-budgetary, could help with the tight budget year. House Bill 1128 renewed an expiring provision that allows USG institutions to carry forward certain funds from one fiscal year to the next, giving administrators flexibility in Institute budgeting. Securing passage of the bill was Tech’s final legislative priority.

“I am very appreciative of our partners in the House and Senate who advocated for Georgia Tech and helped us achieve our priorities,” Sheheane noted. “I also want to thank my GT colleagues, Betsy Jackson and George Ray, for the incredible job they did in positioning Tech for a successful session. I hope that our faculty, staff, alumni, and friends will join our office in thanking the Governor and members of the General Assembly for their support.”

View the final budget documents online at http://tinyurl.com/budgetDocs.

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An era when sessions have rarely extended beyond the first days of April, the late adjournment was indicative of the session’s trials.

Beginning with significant changes in the House leadership and continuing throughout the session with the volatility of election year politics, the legislative landscape proved unpredictable. Combined with the economic environment that saw decreases in tax revenue for 15 consecutive months and shrinkage of the state budget by $3 billion from recent years, legislators and laypersons were left in a vortex of uncertainty.

However, even given the exceptional forces, legislators seemed discontent with allowing the legislative days to simply run down. Leaders and rank-and-file members alike worked together to address new and perennial issues facing the state. The session also appeared to foster a new-found sense of cooperation between a House and Senate that spent many of the past years as bitter rivals.

At the end of the final day, no matter one’s political inclination, it cannot be denied that lawmakers took up significant legislation aimed to address serious issues. Though the positive or negative points of legislation will be debated for days to come, measures were passed by both chambers to deal with the signature issues, water and ethics reform, and the perennial issues, transportation. And in a year of financial crisis, legislators passed a balanced budget.

Though the 2010 legislature may be referred to as “the long one” well into the future, equally memorable should be the gravity of its work.