

OPINION

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

"Ask yourself one question. 'Is it right?' Then do what you believe is best for your town, your state and your country." — James M. Cox, founder, Cox Enterprises

EDITORIAL BOARD

Donna B. Hall, Publisher
Kevin Riley, Editor

Mark A. Waligore,
Senior Director and Managing Editor

Andre Jackson,
Opinion Page Editor

SUNDAY ISSUE: VIEWPOINTS ON ISSUES FACING GEORGIA

STATE SPENDING, GEORGIANS' NEEDS

A look at good work left undone

By Mary Margaret Oliver

Passage of Senate Bill 202 election restrictions dominated our work and performance in the 2021 session, and as a result many good efforts were left undone. I am already think-



Oliver

ing about the 2022 session and work left on the table for legislation that should be passed but perhaps more importantly, budget decisions delayed or not even discussed.

In every year, the budget for the upcoming fiscal year beginning on July 1 is the only required action for the Georgia General Assembly session. For the fiscal year 2022 budget detailed in House Bill 81, the economic impact of the COVID-19 virus, the unknowable projections for state revenue and the infusion of billions of dollars of CARES money plus \$4.9 billion of Rescue Act money are significant and unique factors.

Since the governor alone directs the federal stimulus money from Congress (or so he claims), how do the 2022 state budget writers respond in the traditional appropriations format? I have been a member of the Appropriations Committee for more than two decades, half as a member of the majority party, and half in the minority. Never has there been an infusion of almost \$10 billion of



Among the many serious issues not fully addressed during the most recent legislative session under the Gold Dome is just how should the \$10 billion infusion of federal emergency funds be allocated. AJC 2015

one-time federal money with significant discretion given to a governor to spend. It's an unprecedented opportunity.

We have had little discussion in public about this budget infusion of almost \$10 billion. And any budget decisions that may have been reached by the governor with or without Republican legislative leaders on spending of dollars is unknown to the public and the remaining General Assembly members.

Here are my questions for a public discussion and possible decision-making:

What is the impact of COVID-19 on our 1.7 million Georgia

schoolchildren in K-12 from the virtual learning that has been the reality for over half of them? If 20% of high schoolers drop out in a "normal" year, how many more will drop out based on COVID Zoom education? If between 20% and 40% of schoolchildren struggle in a normal year to stay on grade level, what research has been conducted to learn the best use of federal stimulus money to help them catch up?

And what did we learn about the benefits of virtual learning for other children who have maintained grade level or progressed educationally? What is

the COVID-19 isolation mental health impact on children, and based on research, what mental health services must be provided?

What is the current state of our public health system based on CARES money that was spent through the multiple stimulus packages under the Trump administration? Where did it go, and how much of the 2020 CARES money is yet unspent? What data do we have of expenditure of this money to determine what worked and what did not?

With judges and other lawyers, I have discussed how the

Rescue Act money can be used to address the statewide backlog of almost 100,000 criminal charges that have not been indicted or tried based on the Supreme Court Emergency Public Health Orders. Do we know how many alleged offenders are in jail unable to get a bond, or make any progress on their case to prove their possible innocence?

Without any additional financial help, counties and cities will be unable to address the backlog, and even with additional money and leadership, a comprehensive budget and plan is required. Again, what have we learned by the extensive use of virtual court hearings without the physical presence of counsel, parties and judges? Has it worked without violation of constitutional rights?

On Sine Die evening, along with the vote on HB 81, the governor announced he is forming some committees to examine spending of the \$4.9 billion from the Rescue Act funding on a few limited issues. I volunteer to serve on all these committees and attend to raise these questions directly, as well as many others to help maximize the benefits of an unprecedented infusion of \$10 billion of pandemic money.

Georgians cannot afford to miss this unprecedented opportunity to spend federal dollars wisely.

Mary Margaret Oliver, D-Decatur, is a state representative.

STRINGS ON FEDERAL MONEY

State stands firm against unchecked Congress

By Chris Carr

President Joe Biden and the Democratic Congress could have brought forward an American Rescue Plan Act with bipartisan consensus — one



Carr

tightly focused on distributing vaccines, opening schools, helping the unemployed and stabilizing small businesses.

What we got instead is a budget-busting spending spree that rewards blue states and Democratic interest groups and that hijacks a crisis to fulfill a liberal wish list.

As Georgia leaders have rightly pointed out, the law penalizes states like Georgia that safely reopened their economies. It favors the Democratic-controlled states that didn't.

As Georgia attorney general, I can't do anything about Congress passing a law that's unfair. But I won't sit idly by when it passes one that's unconstitutional.

The new law could strip our states of their core authority to implement basic state tax policy. This is unacceptable and would represent the greatest invasion of state sovereignty by Congress ever attempted.

That's why I co-lead a coalition of 21 attorneys general in urging the U.S. Department of Treasury to take immediate

action to ensure the law cannot be used to deny Georgia the ability to cut taxes in any manner for years to come.

In this unprecedented attempt at federal takeover of state tax policy, certain provisions of the act forbid states from using COVID-19 relief funds to "directly or indirectly offset a reduction in ... net tax revenues" resulting from state laws or regulations that reduce tax burdens, whether by cutting rates or by giving rebates, deductions, credits "or otherwise."

Our coalition demanded that Treasury adopt a narrow interpretation of the language. A broad interpretation of the law could prohibit two separate tax-relief measures that Gov.

Brian Kemp signed into law last month: an extension of a tax credit for Georgia families who adopt a child out of foster care, and an increase to the standard deduction, which would provide Georgians with an estimated \$140 million in state income tax relief that largely benefits those of lower to middle incomes.

Additionally, as written, the act declares that a governor could accept stimulus funds and thereby bind both the state Legislature and a future successor from cutting any tax or tax assessments in the near future. This would also be a clear intrusion by Congress upon state sovereignty.

Our coalition requested the U.S. Treasury Department to

confirm by March 23 that the law does not prohibit states from generally providing tax relief. Treasury responded on the deadline.

The response signals that our coalition was right to fight this unprecedented attempt at federal takeover of state policy. In the letter, Treasury provides some assurance and promises to more specifically address the issues we raised. But we are not ready to let our guard down. We will be closely monitoring how they do this so that our ability to enact good tax policies that benefit Georgians is not compromised in any way.

Chris Carr is Georgia attorney general.

SHORING UP CARE

Georgia's nursing home workers need more support

By Ginny Helms

For a number of years, I served as a judge for the Ms. Georgia Nursing Home Beauty Pageant. One



Helms

by one, finalists came into a room with six judges and spent a few minutes telling us what they did for fun, what gave them

purpose and meaning, how they engaged with residents and staff, and generally what life was like for them in the community where they lived.

These residents, all winners

from their own community's pageant, lit up as they told us about life in the nursing home.

They commonly said that they moved in because of health problems and the inability to live on their own.

They often said they didn't want to move into a nursing home but they adjusted and they thrived.

They said they loved outings, BINGO, helping other residents, cookouts and other activities that gave them a sense of community and they loved interacting with staff.

The nursing home was their home, their community.

During the pandemic, caring, compassionate staff worked

hard to be there for the residents when family members couldn't visit. Relationships flourished and helped residents get through this trying time.

The media coverage about inadequate care in nursing homes shows that we need to be proactive in shoring up care in long-term care facilities.

Staff shortages are the biggest threat to quality care. We need to recognize that working in a nursing home is hard work and staff make so little they often have to work two or more jobs to make ends meet.

We are losing people to other employers that pay higher wages. We expect the staffing shortage to become worse in

nursing homes if we aren't able to keep up with the pay of other industries.

We must reimburse nursing homes at a rate that allows them to pay a livable wage and benefits for their staff. Medicaid is the primary payer source for nursing homes and the rate that is paid needs to be increased to allow better pay for workers.

Many employers are moving to a \$15 per hour rate and we need to move in that direction for staff in long-term care if we are to keep adequate staffing levels.

We also have to create clear pathways for staff in long-term care to further their education and have opportunities for

career growth so we can keep people in this line of work. We need to create environments where staff are appreciated and want to work.

LeadingAge Georgia members who provide nursing home care are mission-driven, primarily not-for-profit and it shows in the quality of care in their communities. Each of them will tell you we have to shore up staffing.

We need to take steps now because quality staffing equals quality care.

Ginny Helms is president of LeadingAge Georgia, an association of not-for-profit and other housing and services providers for older adults.

ABOUT THIS PAGE

The editorial page offers the AJC editorial board's insight and opinion on issues important to our community. It's a key part of our forum where different viewpoints are represented.

The board's mission is to be a catalyst for discussion and solutions-oriented community action to better both the Atlanta area and Georgia.

While the editorial board will offer opinions each Sunday, we recognize the importance of balance and of showcasing other views. Look for them on this page. Our intent is to give you more than just our viewpoint on each week's topic — with it will come a wide variety of information to help you make the best possible decisions.

The Atlanta Journal

THE ATLANTA CONSTITUTION