

Metro/region

Under the Dome

Capitol briefs

GOING TO BAT FOR KSU: Rep. John Wiles, R-west Cobb, stood in the House speaker's position briefly Thursday to introduce the national champion Kennesaw State University baseball and softball teams.

A resolution sponsored by the Cobb delegation was passed in the House commending the Lady Owls and the Fighting Owls for their ballfield victories last year.

"At Kennesaw State University, we have a motto: 'We're a place where athletics and academics are teammates,'" said KSU President Dr. Betty Siegel. "We are so proud of our student athletes and we are delighted to have this opportunity today to thank you in person for this beautiful honor you have given us in this resolution."

KSU guests on the House floor Thursday were: Dr. Siegel, Dave Waples, athletic director; Mike Sansing, head baseball coach; team captains Joe Parks, Matt Hounes and Brian McDevitt; also Scott Whitlock, head softball coach and team captains Nada Hlohovsky, Paige Wofford and Kim O'Kelley.

About 50 KSU baseball and softball players were sitting in the gallery above the House floor.

FIRST TIME FOR EVERYTHING:

Freshman Rep. Frank Bradford, R-Vinings, has introduced his first piece of legislation: to strengthen election laws for county commissioners in Georgia.

The bill would require all county commissioners to be registered voters and citizens of the United States.

Last year, Rep. Randy Sauder, R-Smyrna, introduced the same bill, but it was lost in the House Rules Committee because of the mass number of bills introduced, he said.

"It appears to be a constitutional requirement but not a codified requirement," Rep. Bradford said. "This bill will clear up that discrepancy."

Odds & ends

Rep. Roy Barnes, D-Mableton, said Thursday he regrets walking into a room full of reporters at the state Capitol on Tuesday and making a disparaging comment about Cobb Commission Chairman Bill Byrne's family.

The comment came after Byrne sent a letter to Rep. Barnes chastising the lawmaker for introducing a resolution that demands House Speaker Newt Gingrich pay back the Kennesaw State University Foundation for legal expenses. In Byrne's letter, he noted that he intends to run for governor in 1998 and is a potential opponent of Barnes, who has already announced his candidacy.

Barnes sent a letter to Byrne on Wednesday in which he apologized for the off-the-cuff remark he made after receiving Byrne's letter. Referring to Byrne's political hopes, Barnes said, "I don't know who is going to run his campaign — his lesbian daughter or his stripper daughter."

"The letter said that I made a comment about your family and the comment was inappropriate, and I apologize to you and your family," Rep. Barnes said Thursday. "I also said we have our political differences from time to time but the comment was inappropriate."

Byrne reportedly refused to acknowledge the apology from Barnes.

Rep. Bobby Franklin had some family visitors at the Capitol on Thursday. His wife, Pat, is a fourth-grade teacher at Cobb's Heiskell School. Their daughter, Kathryn, is a student in the class. The entire class met House Speaker Tom Murphy, Secretary of State Lewis Massey and Gov. Zell Miller on their trip.



Bobby Franklin

Rep. Mitchell Kaye, R-east Cobb, was successful in being transferred to the Facilities and Finance subcommittee of the House Education Committee on Thursday. Rep. Kaye said he wanted the assignment because issues will arise in that committee that will affect Cobb County schools.

Sen. Chuck Clay, R-Marietta, entertained visitors from Cobb County this week. Father and daughter combos from the Indian Guides met him in the Senate chamber Tuesday. Included were Joel and Jessica Schancupp, Richard and Laura Calhoun, Marty and Kelly Tvominen and Charles and Jessica Cunningham.

Capitol chatter

"It sure felt good. How'd I look up there?" — Rep. Wiles after his temporary stint Thursday serving as the House speaker.
 "When they call me and ask who I'm going to vote for, I tell them it ain't none of their blank business." — House Speaker Murphy, talking about his bill to let Georgians bar unsolicited calls to their homes.

— Compiled by Staff Writer Greg Hoffman.

Sens. scrutinize welfare reform

The Associated Press

ATLANTA — The governor's plan to overhaul welfare got its first hearing Thursday before a panel of senators who warned they aren't willing to rubber-stamp the proposal.

"I heard it through the grapevine that people don't want any amendments or changes to the bill," said Sen. Diara Harvey Johnson, D-Savannah. "I don't have time to just sit up here and listen and raise my hand and answer 'yes.'"

Gov. Zell Miller has said he'll accept few if any changes to his plan to limit cash welfare benefits to four years and require recipients to find a job or a related activity immediately.

But members of the Senate Health and Human Services Committee pushed state welfare chief Michael Thurmond on several aspects of the bill, such as what happens to recipients who fail to find work in the allotted four years.

"I get people calling me, asking me are they just going to be on the street? And I don't have an answer," said Sen. Connie Stokes, D-Decatur.

"To be honest with you, senator, I don't have an answer to every single question,"

Thurmond replied. "But I do know one thing, the clock is ticking."

Advocates who crowded the hearing room interrupted several times to cheer lawmakers who asked pointed questions and to jeer the bill's defenders.

Georgia will receive about \$330 million in federal block grants for implementing its welfare overhaul after Congress turned welfare management over to the states last year.

Georgia's plan is tougher in some ways than the federal law requires — the state's four-year cap on cash assistance is a year less than the federal limit. But it's more lenient in others, allowing legal aliens benefits for a year, whereas Congress made no such provision.

Some lawmakers called parts of Miller's plan too tough.

Sen. Nadine Thomas, D-Atlanta, opposed a provision that would deny women additional cash benefits for any children born 10 months after the mother enters the rolls.

Lawmakers had previously grappled with the same "family cap" and settled on extending the time limit to two years rather than 10 months.

"We felt at the time that we were punishing those women," Ms. Thomas said. "If it's down to 10 [months] now, we're really punishing them."

Thurmond pointed out that children affected by the cap would still receive non-cash benefits such as Medicaid. He also said it's wrong to assume "if a woman has another child, she will have it with a man who will not support that child."

Sen. Ed Boshears said another provision of the bill, which would deny a guaranteed hearing to Georgians who say they were unfairly denied benefits or cut off the rolls, may violate the constitutional right to a fair hearing.

"This one sentence will cost the taxpayers of the state of Georgia at least a million dollars in legal expenses," said Boshears, R-Brunswick. "It will go all the way to the United States Supreme Court."

Recipients would be able to request a hearing for alleged wrongdoing based on factual errors, said Mark Cohen, executive counsel to Miller. Guaranteed hearings aren't needed because welfare is no longer an entitlement, he said.

House leaders fail to save prison teachers

The Associated Press

ATLANTA — Georgia House leaders failed in another attempt Thursday to persuade the Miller administration to drop its plan to fire 235 prison teachers on Friday because of spending cuts.

"We're at a dead end," said Rep. Bill Lee, D-Forest Park, one of a handful of top legislative leaders who offered budget concessions to Corrections Commissioner Wayne Garner if he would reverse course. "That's it," agreed Speaker Tom Murphy, D-Bremen.

Murphy told Garner that House leaders would give him enough additional money in his budget to keep the teachers on the payroll through June 30 if he would promise to spend the money for that purpose.

But Garner, whose firing of the teachers has been strongly backed by Gov. Zell Miller, refused, defending his stand on the issue as "a wise and prudent decision."

Garner contends that firing the teachers will save the state \$8 million a year. Television classes taught by instructors in distant cities would be offered to inmates instead.

House leaders have been sharply critical of the decision to fire the teachers, largely because it was announced shortly before Christmas.

As House leaders met Thursday to consider budget recommendations, Speaker Tom Murphy, D-Bremen, called Garner.

"I have no problem with this if it's done in the proper method," Murphy told Garner. "I do not feel it was done in the proper method."

Murphy argues the teachers should have been kept on the payroll until summer so they would have enough time to apply for jobs in the fall.

Garner told him that fired teachers who want to do so will be eligible to apply for part-time jobs.

Lawmaker wants tax break for his crops

The Associated Press

ATLANTA — A lawmaker who earns his living growing pecans and peaches is pushing a constitutional amendment to exempt himself and other such farmers from certain property taxes.

If approved by the Legislature and then by voters, the constitutional amendment by Rep. Robert Ray, D-Fort Valley, would give a property tax break to Ray and other farmers whose crops grow on trees or bushes.

"What we've got here is a really blatant violation of conflict of interest," said Melissa Metcalf of the citizen watchdog group Common Cause. "He's introduced a bill for a special tax exemption for himself."

Ray conceded Thursday he would benefit financially from his proposal, but said he didn't know by how much.

"I'm doing this for everybody who's in this business," said Ray, who owns 200 acres of peach and pecan trees. "What's fair is fair, and it will be left up to the public."

In 1994, Georgia voters rejected a similar tax break for blueberry growers that was pushed by Rep. Tommy Smith, D-Alma, a blueberry farmer.

Blueberry farmers would get a second chance under Ray's proposal, which also would benefit growers of pecans, peaches, apples and other fruits or nuts grown on trees or shrubs.

Those farmers want the same tax breaks given to growers of row crops planted in the ground.

With row crops, farmers are taxed on their harvests, but not on the plants themselves.

Examiners question cost of boll weevil eradication

The Associated Press

MONTGOMERY, Ala. — State examiners found the per-acre cost of the boll weevil eradication program more expensive in Alabama than in neighboring states, but there was no immediate explanation of why it costs more.

Federal officials said Thursday they had been made aware of the examiners' findings and were reviewing the program's finances.

The effort to wipe out the cotton pest is run by the Montgomery-based Southeastern Boll Weevil Eradication Foundation Inc. — a private, nonprofit corporation created in 1987 to manage the program in eight states. Officials with the foundation had no immediate comment but said a statement would be issued later.

The examiners said that in 1995 the cost of boll weevil traps was 59 cents per acre in a 19-county south Alabama area, compared with 27 cents per acre in Florida and a similar amount in Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia.

In 1994, the examiners said, the cost of the traps was 92 cents per acre in south Alabama compared with 23 cents in Florida.

"The state as a whole has poured more money into the program per acre than other states have," said Gail Hubbard,

state audit director for the examiners.

The Alabama program cost \$28 million in 1994-95, with the money coming from the state, federal government and fees that cotton growers assess themselves, she said.

She said the foundation could not account for the allocated program costs in Alabama. That means area farmers, who pay a price per-acre for the eradication program, cannot be sure how their money is being spent, she said.

The examiners said Alabama is the only one of eight states in the cotton program to provide state taxpayer funds — an amount growing from \$700,000 in 1987-88 to \$2.72 million in 1995-96.

The examiners also said previous reports questioned the unusually close relationship between the foundation and the federal agriculture officials who oversee it.

An earlier review showed the foundation claimed more than \$2,000 in expenses from late 1993 through 1995 for employees' golf-tournament registrations, beer, and country club dining.

The eight states involved in the Southeastern program are Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina and Virginia.

Fashion Saturday

SALE

EXTRA

10% OFF

The Entire Store
Including All Clearance Items!

Our Winter Clearance Continues!

SAVE 25-60% OFF

Holiday & Winter Fashions

Clearance Sale Going On Now. EXTRA 10% Saturday February 1 Only!
During Saturday's Big Sale, No Other Discounts Apply.

351 Roselane St. • Marietta
Phone: 428-2861
Mon - Sat: 9 AM to 6 PM
Sunday: 1 PM to 6 PM

Department Store Brands...Outlet Prices...Quality Guaranteed!