



{{FirstName or 'Friends'}} --

We just concluded week four of the 2023 Legislative Session and things are moving fast. We filed two of our top priority bills, one piece of legislation will be heard in committee first thing next week, and we voted for the amended budget for Fiscal Year 2023, sending it to the Senate for approval.

There is never a boring week here under the Gold Dome, but this week was certainly the most substantial so far.

Let's dive in.



LEGISLATION AND ISSUES TO WATCH

This week **the House passed our [revised 2023 mid-year budget](#)** to account for additional investments made after the passage of the original Fiscal Year 2023 budget. It will now progress to the Senate, where it will no doubt undergo further revisions before coming to a vote.

Budgets are a statement of our priorities, and there were many items I was happy to see included.

- As mentioned in Governor Kemp's State of the State Address, there will be a **\$2.4 billion dollar increase in spending** in the current budget year.
- There will be a **\$2,000 pay raise for all public school teachers, state employees and university employees**.
- The budget also calls for \$14.5 million to be spent on **one-time \$250 bonus payments** to 55,000 retired state employees.
- The **\$1 billion income tax breaks** would likely result in approximately \$250 to \$500 refunds to taxpayers.
- The **\$1 billion property tax rebates** would likely return approximately \$500 to homeowners. However, it is important to note that money for schools generally comes from property taxes, so this is definitely something to keep our eye on, particularly for our less-resourced school systems.
- There will be **\$100 million** invested over the next three years to help defray costs resulting from a **sharp rise in health insurance premiums for school employees**. School systems would see the [employer share of health insurance costs jump](#) from **\$945 to \$1,580 per month starting in January 2024**, but while the additional outlay will soften the blow for school systems absorbing this cost for teachers and other certified employees, it **does not cover the cost for our valued non-certified employees** (for example, janitorial staff and cafeteria staff)
- **Full funding of Georgia's current [Quality Basic Education K-12 student formula \(QBE\)](#) formula** at \$12.4 billion. That said, the QBE formula [has not been updated since the 1980s](#), and in the intervening two decades the state's population has approximately doubled. Of note,

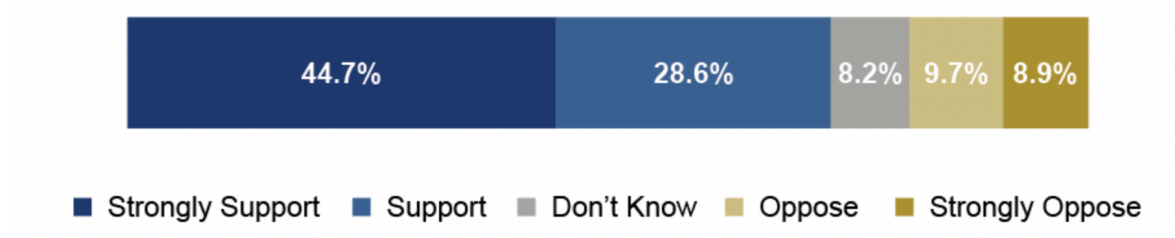
Georgia is also one of only six states that do not allocate extra money to students living in poverty.

I think there’s a lot that is good in the amended FY 2023 budget, and I was comfortable voting YES on its passage in the House this week. I do, however, retain significant concerns on whether we as a state, in a time of **record budget surpluses generated in part by severe austerity at a detriment to our state’s education and health systems**, are doing enough to invest in our future.

In particular, in addition to short-term one-time payouts, I would like to see [continued, longer-term investments](#), like an [update to our QBE formula](#), which could modernize our funding to accommodate costs for expenses like transportation, technology and counselors. Given that lower family income is also one of the largest challenges faced by our school systems, **updating our QBE to allocate extra money for students living in poverty** needs to be part of our budgeting formula.

[Recent polling done by the GPBI](#) shows that **a majority of Georgians support providing additional funding for education**, and there’s a lot of opportunity this year to invest in our students. I hope our amended FY 2023 budget can help continue this conversation.

Question 6: Georgia is one of six states that does not provide additional money to K-12 public schools that serve students from families with low incomes. Do you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose providing additional funding for K-12 schools tied to the number of students they serve from families at or near the poverty level?



TEAM AU BILL TRACKER

At this point in the session I have been proud to **sponsor or co-sponsor 24 pieces of filed legislation.**



Of these, we have our first resolution scheduled to be heard in the House Health committee first thing next week! (The hearing will be on **Monday 2/6 at 2:00pm in 341 CAP** and will also be [live-streamed and archived](#).)

[HR 43](#) proposes creating a study committee to **evaluate the health costs of smoking in Georgia**. This would include the costs of uncompensated care due to chronic diseases resulting from tobacco smoke, costs to state, federal, and private insurance systems, as well as costs in the forms of lost productivity, school attendance, or child health due to chronic smoke exposure.

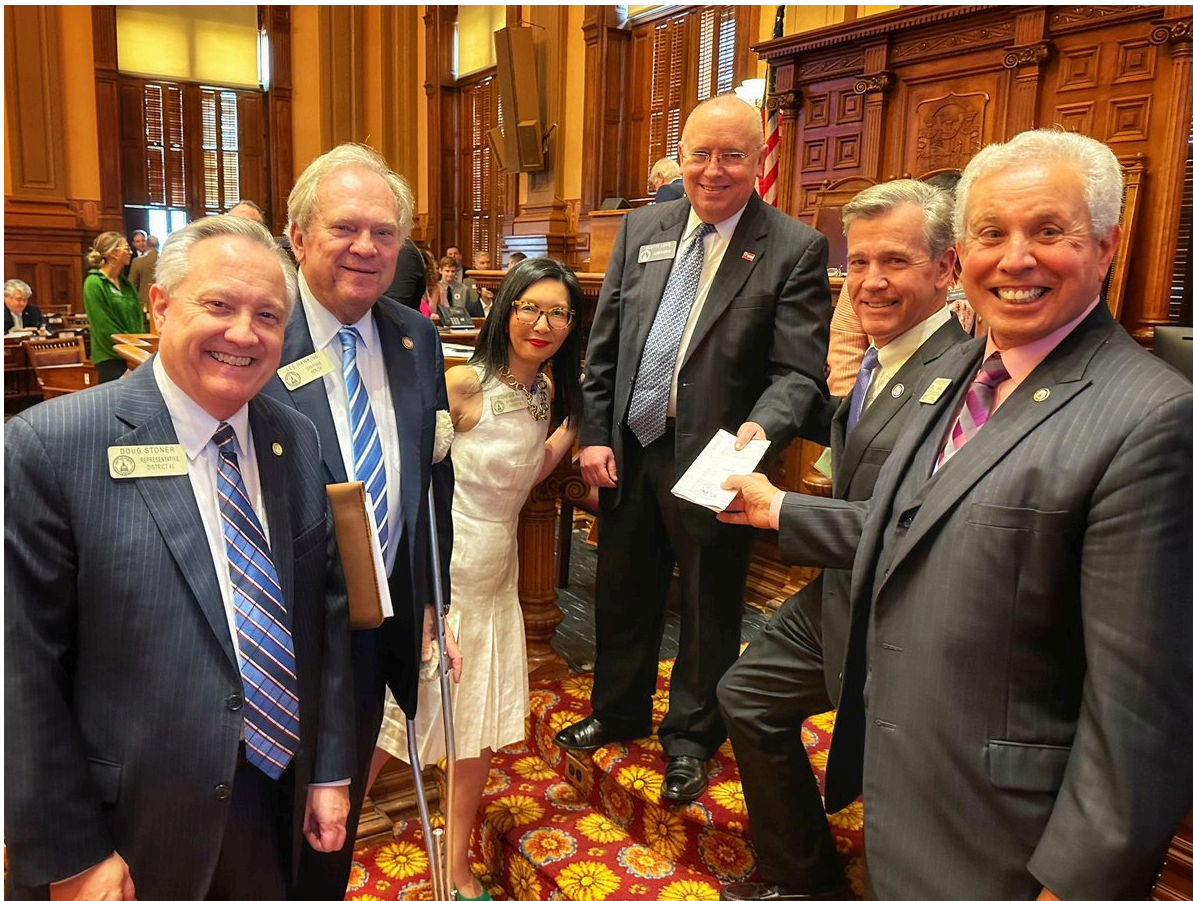
I've been working on this particular issue for some time now, and I consider it a **companion piece** to another priority piece of legislation I'm working on, **[HB 191](#)**, which aims to **raise the state tobacco tax**.

Georgia has the second-lowest tobacco tax in the nation—while the national average is \$1.91/pack, Georgia’s tax is a paltry **37 cents/pack**. At present [each household in Georgia pays around \\$900 per year](#) to support the health costs of smokers.

Raising the state tobacco tax would have two important effects. The first is that it would **disincentivize a harmful and expensive health behavior**, the exact costs of which my study committee would look to measure. Here I note in [an interview with 11Alive News](#) that **younger smokers are especially sensitive to price increases**, and in being able to disincentivize younger smokers and encouraging them to quit, they gain decades of life and productivity.



The second important effect is that raising the state tobacco tax would generate additional revenue which could be used to **reinvest into our underfunded public health systems**. This could be a particular help to our rural health partners. As a practicing physician I am proud that this bill will be **sponsored by many of our Republican colleagues with a background in healthcare**, including a pharmacist, an ER physician, and a dentist.



A new [non-partisan poll](#) commissioned by the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute and the University of Georgia shows **nearly 63% of Georgians support raising the state tobacco tax**. All of us sponsoring this bill understand that the best health policy is often non-partisan, and I hope that HB 191 will soon have a committee hearing as well in [House Ways and Means](#).

Question 2: Georgia currently has one of the lowest tobacco taxes in the nation, with the state’s tax of 37 cents per pack of cigarettes ranking 49th of out of 50 states. Nationwide, the average state sales tax is \$1.91 per pack. Do you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose Georgia raising its tobacco tax to at least the national average?



■ Strongly Support
 ■ Support
 ■ Don't Know
 ■ Oppose
 ■ Strongly Oppose

My next slate of priority bills aims to address gun safety. This week I was proud to partner with [Rep. Mary Margaret Oliver](#) to [announce](#) this slate of **common-sense gun safety bills**. While our Republican colleagues often talk about the

rise in violent crime and the need to create a safer environment for our children, they continue to ignore that **gun safety needs to be a key part of that conversation.**

I spoke with Donna Lowry and my colleague [Sen. Brandon Beach](#) on this issue this past week on [GPB Lawmakers](#). As always, **I wish our Republican colleagues would pursue with as much vigor measures to prevent gun violence as they do measures to prosecute violent acts after the fact.**

Our **gun safety slate** includes the following pieces of legislation:

- **[HB 44](#)** would require **private gun sales and transfers to be subject to background checks**. Before completing the transfer or sale, the universal background check would have to indicate that the buyer or recipient of the firearm is not prohibited from receiving or possessing the firearm under state or federal law. Through HB 44, we seek to prevent felons, those convicted of domestic abuse, and people with a serious history of mental illness from easily purchasing a firearm.
- **[HB 45](#)** would require a **three-day waiting period for firearm purchases**, which builds in a “cooling-off” period to defuse violent acts of impulse, including mass shootings, interpersonal violence, and suicide. This legislation would also require license sellers to make records available for inspection by law enforcement to assist with criminal investigations.
- **[HB 135](#)** would establish that **firearm owners would be found responsible if their firearms were available to be obtained and used by a minor** to make a threat of violence, an individual during the commission of a crime or during an act that caused the death or injury of an individual if the act was not in self-defense.
- Finally **[HB 161](#)**, or **The Pediatric Health Safe Storage Act**, would require firearms that may be accessible for minors to be stored securely.

All four of these bills are signed on to by a wide coalition of Democrats, including all of House Minority Leadership, freshman members such as [Rep. Omari Crawford](#) (an Assistant DeKalb County Attorney who has done extensive work around the issue of safe storage), [Rep. Anne Allen Westbrook](#)

(an attorney who has been a decade-long leader with [Moms Demand Action](#)), and many members of the House Democratic Caucus.



As this and other priority bills move through the legislative process, you can follow them using [this helpful tool](#) from the AJC. **To see all the bills and resolutions I have sponsored or co-sponsored**, you can check [my legislative page](#) under SPONSORED LEGISLATION > ALL.



LEGISLATIVE AAPI CAUCUS NEWS

This week **members of Georgia's Legislative AAPI Caucus** [put out a statement](#) after the horrific [mass shooting in Monterey Park, California](#), which This past week we were also happy to have Governor Kemp stop by to **recognize the AAPI community in celebration of the Lunar New Year at the Capitol**, at a press conference organized by our colleague and Legislative AAPI Caucus Secretary [Rep. Soo Hong](#).

AAPI Georgians are a key part of Georgia's story, and are a key part of Georgia's future.



GA HOUSE DEMOCRATIC CAUCUS LEADERSHIP ROLE

This week I'm also proud to announce that I will be serving as a **Deputy Whip for the House Democratic Caucus!** We have an incredible Deputy Whip team, and I look forward to working with our Whip [Rep. Sam Park](#) and the rest of House Democratic Leadership to help our Caucus stay strong, focused, and to continue to grow our power.



From Top Left to Bottom Right: Rep. Tremaine Teddy Reese, Rep. Phil Olaleye, Rep. Tanya Miller, Rep. Saira Draper, Rep. Ruwa Romman, Rep. Sheila Jones, Rep. Brian Prince, Rep. Debra Bazemore, Rep. Teri Anulewicz, Rep. Omari Crawford, Rep. Ann Allen Westbrook, Rep. Michelle Au

CALL TO ACTION: PRESS EVENT FOR GUN SAFETY

SAVE THE DATE! In partnership with a coalition of legislators (including Rep. Oliver and Senate Minority Chair [Sen. Elena Parent](#)), healthcare leaders, gun

safety advocates, youth activists, and community members, we will be hosting a **press event at the Capitol on Thursday, 1/9** to insist that our slate of common sense gun safety legislation be given the respect of a **fair hearing in committee**.

More information on how you can watch and participate will be [posted on our social media channels](#) and sent via email by Monday. If you are not on our mailing list, **this would be a good time to [sign up](#)**.



As always, please do not hesitate to [reach out to our office](#) should you need any assistance, would like to drop by to visit the Capitol, or if you have any concerns you'd like me to address on your behalf.

It is my honor to be your voice in the Georgia House of Representatives.

In Service,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "W. Michelle". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long, sweeping underline.

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