



HealthVoices

Successful Advocacy at the State Legislature

Part two of a two-part series.

Issue 3, 2012

This brief is designed to provide a direct-from-the-trenches perspective on what every advocate needs to know about program funding in Georgia's state budget. It was preceded by a companion brief, Part I, which discussed working on general legislative issues in the Georgia General Assembly.

A View from the Trenches – Part II

By Scott Maxwell

The Budget Trench is a Canyon

Part I of this series discussed working in the trenches to get legislation passed or tweaked by the Georgia General Assembly. Given the size and complexity of the state's budget -- and current dearth of state revenues -- the analogy for Part II, the appropriations process, should probably reference a canyon instead of a trench. But even considering the scope of the challenge, it is certainly possible for advocates to have an affect on line items in Georgia's state budget.

The Budget Timeline

State government starts its budget work early, and so should you! And early means 13 to 14 months prior to a budget year's start date of July 1. For the sake of illustration, let's work with fiscal year 2020 (FY 20). Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH) staff would begin their work in late spring of 2018 on the budget that does not take effect until July 1, 2019 and runs all the way through June 30, 2020. DPH and other agencies are directed by the governor to meet a first of September deadline each year to submit their requests to the Governor's Office of Planning and Budget (OPB). During the fall, OPB communicates back and forth with all agencies and the governor in order to develop the governor's complete recommendation by year's end. In this case, the governor would present his "Budget Report" to the Georgia General Assembly during the first week of the 2019 legislative session, and that body would develop its own bill over the course of most of the legislative session. The FY 20 appropriations bill that is eventually passed, minus any line-item vetoes made by the governor, would go into effect on July 1, 2019.

To have any program included or increased in the state budget, it is vital that the agency involved, OPB and the House and Senate budget offices understand your issue. Take your case to them with data, illustrations, and, when possible, how the program has worked in other states.

Questions that should be anticipated when pitching a budget request include:

- ✓ *Why is this program needed or why does it deserve more money?*
- ✓ *How many people will be impacted?*
- ✓ *Does spending a little now prevent spending more later?*
- ✓ *Does your program fit into the general direction the governor wants the state to go?*
- ✓ *Does it draw down matching federal dollars?*
- ✓ *Once started, can the program survive on the same amount of funding, or will its budget line need to grow larger and larger? How much could it grow and how quickly?*

It's usually during the summer months when staff members from OPB, various agencies and the House and Senate budget offices conduct site visits to see how programs really work out in the field. Not every cause or program warrants a site visit, but many lend themselves to first-hand observation. Site visits help staff and legislators understand a specific need or program, while also allowing them to fulfill their oversight responsibilities.



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The Legislative Process

While it is preferable to be included in the governor's budget recommendations, your program can still become a part of the budget even if it's omitted from the governor's report. All budget bills are introduced in the House per the Georgia Constitution. As soon as it receives the governor's recommendations, the House begins to tailor the budget to its own preferences. Once passed by the House, the budget bill goes to the Senate which makes its own changes. Discrepancies between the House and Senate are sorted out during meetings of the elite Appropriations Conference Committee composed of three members appointed from each body. The legislature may approve, reject or alter any item contained in the governor's recommendations. Legislators may also add programs not mentioned by the governor. Thus, the legislative session presents advocates with an opportunity to have new funding levels or entirely new programs added to the budget. If the desired funding is in the governor's recommendation, advocates must work with the House and Senate to keep that specific appropriation. If the governor did not include the desired funding (or all of it), the advocate must work with legislators to insert it into the budget.

Advocates should remember that the debate over state appropriations is not about which programs are good and which programs are bad. The debate is over which good programs will get how much funding. When an advocate for a particular program asks legislators for an increase, the response will often be, "From which program currently being funded do you recommend we take the money for your increase?" Be careful how you answer that question. If you specifi-

cally target another program's funding, its supporters may very well repay the favor. And, remember that compromise between Houses is never more common than when working on the appropriations bills. It is not unusual to find that the final amount budgeted for a program is half way between what the House put in and what the Senate put in. Should that happen, take it and declare victory!

The Committee Process

Because the budget covers every area and category of spending by the state, the Appropriations Committee is the one place where subcommittees tend to do the heavy lifting. Therefore, it is essential for advocates to direct their efforts toward the appropriate subcommittee chair and members. As an example, while there are currently 77 members of the House Appropriations Committee, there are only nine members of the Health Subcommittee. (The precise number of members may vary from session to session, but the ratio remains relatively consistent.) It will be this subcommittee that does the nitty-gritty work on the House's version of the budget for the Departments under its purview. The subcommittee chair is more important in the Appropriations Committee than in any other. For example, the chair of the House Appropriations Health Subcommittee (technically, Vice Chair of Appropriations for Health) has great discretion when his subcommittee considers the budgets for the agencies with various health-related programs. The subcommittee chair works with the chair of the full committee and other House leaders before submitting his report. The full Appropriations Committee rarely, if ever, changes the recommendation made by one of its subcommittees. Get your work on the budget done in Subcommittee! The list of Subcommittee

members can be found on the General Assembly's web site: www.legis.ga.gov.

The Amended Budget

The State of Georgia actually utilizes a two-budget process to comply with the constitutional mandate to operate on a balanced financial basis. An "amended budget" bill is introduced during the legislative session of the current fiscal year. Changes are made mid-stream to the current operating budget in order to bring spending in alignment with the latest estimate of state revenues, which is set by the governor. With the ups and downs of a difficult economy, income projections made the previous year may have to be adjusted to match declining real-world revenues. The amended budget typically governs only the final three months of the fiscal year - April, May and June. The savvy advocate will be alert to changes made in the amended budget that could easily have a severe impact on important line items.

The Governor's Role

As mentioned, the governor starts the budget process rolling by providing the General Assembly with his recommendations in the form of the "Governor's Budget Report." Another responsibility reserved for the governor is to set the state's estimated income for the current or next fiscal year. This is the dollar amount against which the legislature is required to balance state spending. (Federal pass-through dollars increase the total amount that can be spent.) In lieu of a crystal ball, the Governor arrives at his estimate after consultation with his own Office of Planning and Budget and selected advisors. The official state economist provides him with low, medium and high projections. Again, these calculations are being done at least six months prior to the beginning of the fiscal year.

The Budget Timeline Example - Fiscal Year 2020 (FY 20)

→ Late spring 2018

Georgia Dept. of Public Health (DPH) and other agencies begin budget preparation

→ September 1, 2018

Budget requests for all agencies due to Governor's Office of Planning and Budget (OPB)

→ Fall 2018

OPB coordinates between agencies and governor to develop the governor's complete budget recommendation



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HB742 Section 37: Public Health, Department of	Tracking Sheet								FY2013	
	Governor's Recommendation		House		Senate		Conf Comm			
	State Funds	Total Funds	State Funds	Total Funds	State Funds	Total Funds	State Funds	Total Funds		
37.11 Public Health Formula Grants to Counties										
37.11.1. Fund the first and second year phase-in for the new grant-in-aid formula to hold harmless all counties.	-	-	\$2,517,334	\$2,517,334	\$2,517,334	\$2,517,334	\$2,517,334	\$2,517,334	\$2,517,334	\$2,517,334
37.12 Vital Records										
37.12.1. Reduce funds for operating expenses.	-	-	(\$45,000)	(\$45,000)	(\$45,000)	(\$45,000)	(\$45,000)	(\$45,000)	(\$45,000)	(\$45,000)

As happened during the recent recession, the official revenue estimate can be changed in the middle of the fiscal year should economic conditions warrant. The legislature responds by making adjustments in its amended budget to match the new target. Plus, the Governor sometimes orders state agencies to “spend less” in anticipation of falling revenues and subsequent legislative action. For the advocate, this means that even after a governor has signed the budget, the total dollars spent on a particular program may be adjusted.

The governor also has the option to veto the entire budget or to veto specific programs or bond projects within the budget. He may not substitute his own dollar amount for an amount passed by the legislature. It’s all or nothing. The governor’s line-item veto or whole-bill veto can be overridden by a two-thirds vote of both Houses of the legislature, but that has not happened in recent history. The constitution provides the governor a 40-day window following legislative adjournment in which to sign or veto any bill, or the bill becomes law without his signature. Thus, the General Assembly would have to be called into special session or wait until the following year to override a veto signed post adjournment.

Tracking Document

To follow the development of the state’s budget, it is important to access the “tracking document.” The tracking document deals only with those items that are different from last year’s budget. The tracking document lists the line item in question and shows in the first column what amount the governor recommended. The next column records the House’s action regarding that line item, and that is followed by the Senate’s action. Finally, the tracking document lists any changes made by the conference committee between the House and Senate. The tracking document can be accessed on line. Once the House has passed the bill, go to: www.house.ga.gov, click on “Budget and Research Office,” then click on “Budget Documents,” and be sure to select the correct fiscal year or amended fiscal year from the dropdown list. Once the Senate has acted, go to www.senate.ga.gov and follow the same process.

Steps to Remember

- Start early.
- Work with the appropriate state agency, OPB and the House and Senate budget staffs.
- Focus legislative contacts on members of the appropriate budget subcommittees.
- Make your case with data, statistics and illustrations about your program.
- Work both Houses of the legislature, whether you’re trying to keep current funding or add a new program.

Scott Maxwell has labored in the trenches (and budget canyons) at the Georgia state capitol for 15 years as a principal in Mathews & Maxwell, Inc., an Atlanta-based governmental affairs consulting firm. He served as Press Secretary to former U.S. Senator Sam Nunn in the late eighties, and more recently was the lead lobbyist in the successful effort to create a cabinet-level Department of Public Health in Georgia.

→ January 2019

Governor presents official "Budget Report" to Georgia General Assembly

→ January - April 2019

General Assembly crafts its own budget bill, eventually passing both the FY 2019 amended and FY 2020 appropriations bills

→ July 1, 2019

FY 2020 budget takes effect, minus any line-item vetoes by governor (through June 2020)



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Healthcare Georgia Foundation is a catalyst for better health and health care in Georgia.

Through strategic grantmaking, Healthcare Georgia Foundation supports organizations that drive positive change; promotes programs that improve health and health care among underserved individuals and communities; and connects people, partners and resources across Georgia.

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Healthcare Georgia Foundation is a statewide, private independent foundation whose mission is to advance the health of all Georgians and to expand access to affordable, quality health care for underserved individuals and communities.

