

Legislative session back in full swing

By: Shaddi Abusaid

With the General Assembly back in session, Cherokee County's legislators are back at work under the Gold Dome to draft new legislation and pass bills over the 40-day legislative session.

In addition to writing and co-sponsoring new laws, several of the state elected officials are hoping to revive legislation that didn't quite make it last year.

One bill aimed at rewriting a law to prohibit sexual relationships between students and school district employees was introduced in the House last week with the support of four Cherokee representatives.

Reps. Scot Turner, R-Holly Springs, Wes Cantrell, R-Woodstock, Michael Caldwell, R-Woodstock and John Carson, R-Marietta, have co-sponsored legislation introduced by Rep. Joyce Chandler that would close a loophole making it legal for certain school employees to have sexual relationships with students.

Cantrell said the loophole was overlooked by legislators who drafted the initial law, which was aimed at preventing sexual abuse by teachers, police, hospital workers or anyone else in a position of power.

"I think a student would look at any adult who's employed at their campus as an authority figure," Cantrell said after the bill was introduced last week. "And that authority can be abused in those type relationships."

Turner said he is also working to draft legislation aimed at prohibiting the state from seizing someone's personal assets before they are convicted of a crime.

"We'll be working on civil asset forfeiture in a couple of different ways," Turner said. "I will be introducing a bill that requires a conviction prior to the state taking permanent possession of property."

He said he hopes to include legislation that would require written contracts for district attorneys' offices that use contract other attorneys to assist with the civil asset forfeiture process.

Turner worked to get the bill passed during

the 2016 session, but says he plans to re-introduce it this session with "a few tweaks" based on committee feedback.

Holly Springs' lone representative said he is also working on legislation that would allow dog bite victims access to the animal's veterinary immunization records. Turner's "dog bite bill" made it out of committee in 2016, but didn't get to the House floor for a vote, he said.

"I've worked with veterinarians and their association to draft language that would allow a dog bite victim to gain access to vaccination records of the animal that bit them," Turner said. "That way they can tell whether they need to get rabies shots."

He said precautionary treatments for dog bite victims require a series of painful shots into the site of the wound, something that could be avoided if it is confirmed that an animal is up-to-date on its vaccinations. The idea for the bill, Turner said, came about when one of his constituents had a child who was bitten in the face by a dog.

Caldwell said he is trying again to pass a law aimed at implementing term-limits on Georgia's elected senators and representatives.

"As I have for the past four years, I'll introduce legislation to provide consecutive term limits for members of our House and Senate," Caldwell said. "I find one of the most unique parts about the term limits issue is that it crosses party and tenure."

Caldwell said the measure has support from members of both parties, some of whom have been in office for years. But others, he said, are adamantly opposed to the concept.

"There's no perfect system," Caldwell said, "but when I weigh the advantages and disadvantages, I still see a strong benefit to a consecutive term limit that forces a term off once a decade."

The representative also said he plans to continue his fight "to expand freedom" for the state's craft breweries. Caldwell said last year he would like to see the state's breweries be able to sell their products directly to customers

who come by and tour their facilities.

"Our state continues to have the worst craft beer laws in the union and we miss out on roughly 12,000 direct brewery jobs because of it," Caldwell said.

Rep. Mandi Ballinger, R-Canton, was appointed chair of the House Juvenile Justice committee.

"There's a lot more responsibility with being a chairman," Ballinger said. "It's a judicial committee that deals with anything relating to children—be it a child welfare issue or juvenile delinquency, the juvenile code—that's what the committee will be dealing with."

The only Cherokee representative who serves on the appropriations committee, Ballinger said she's been busy since the session began Jan. 9.

Cherokee County's only female legislator said she is also sponsoring bills for the Georgia Commission on Domestic Violence and working on legislation regarding the publication requirement for domestic violence victims who change their names.

Ballinger said she doesn't think victims of domestic violence should be required to announce their name changes, especially if they are trying to get away from an abusive former partner.

"We, as a state, need to be able to keep people safe," she said.

Ballinger co-sponsored Georgia's "Campus Carry" bill last year, which would have allowed college students with concealed carry permits to bring loaded firearms with them on campus and into classrooms.

The measure was ultimately vetoed by Gov. Nathan Deal, but there has been talk of trying to revive the legislation this session.

"Georgia House Republicans are always looking for ways to expand the exercise of the Second Amendment," Ballinger said, adding that she expects a bill could be filed as early as this week.

Sen. Brandon Beach, R-Alpharetta, who was appointed last week to serve as chairman of the Senate Transportation Committee, said

he's looking for ways to expedite the state's road projects.

"I look at it as a great opportunity," Beach said. "We've got a lot of momentum going in the transportation industry right now."

Beach said one of the things he hopes to accomplish this session is getting Georgia's road improvement projects completed quicker and more efficiently.

"With the new Trump administration I think one of the things they will do is help with that," Beach said Monday. "We want to get more federal funding without the strings attached to it so we can get things built."

Sen. John Albers, R-Roswell, said his focus

is on creating jobs while lowering taxes and regulations with a series of bills called "Bring Back Small Business." The senator said he's working with the Job Creators Network to "reduce the burdensome regulations, taxes and red tape for business."

The volunteer firefighter said he also hoped to reintroduce House Bill 216, legislation aimed at supporting firefighters who contract cancer in the line of duty.

"I will work to pass this bill again and make it law," Albers said. "Our first responders must be a top priority."

Sen. Bruce Thompson, R-White, said last week he chaired a data security and cyber study

committee over the summer that resulted in six recommendations he would like to see implemented at the Gold Dome this year and was in the process of drafting legislation to accomplish those initiatives.

Thompson also said he plans on introducing legislation that would require inspections of the state's carnivals.

"Currently, mobile amusement parks are not structurally inspected each time they are assembled for use," Thompson said, adding there have been a number of safety-related issues that have occurred in the state as a result of rides and attractions not being properly put together.