

IT'S NO SECRET: REPUBLICANS DOMINATED RECENT LEGISLATIVE SESSION

Psst! It's okay. You can come out now. The Legislature has adjourned.

As you have read ad nauseum, this was the first legislative session since Hector was a pup that had a Republican governor and Republicans in a majority in both houses. As we quickly found out, however, changing majorities doesn't change behavior. Republicans found out they weren't as crazy about ethics legislation as they had been when they were in the minority, and the pork barrel isn't as onerous as they had once thought.

That is not to say that the session lacked significant legislative developments. Gov. Sonny Perdue has already signed into law a provision that caps jury awards in medical malpractice cases at \$350,000. I don't know if that is a good thing or not, but it upsets a lot of lawyers. Anything that upsets lawyers can't be all bad.

The Legislature also passed a bill making it a felony to send more than 10,000 spam e-mails in any 24-hour period. Good luck on enforcing that law. I got that much e-mail before lunch yesterday touting Montana Oil and Gas stock.

Predictably, the Republican-dominated General Assembly passed legislation requiring that women receive information on the risks of and alternatives to abortion and then wait 24 hours before making a final decision. During the debate, I heard someone say that a fetus was not a living being. I'm glad my daughter and daughter-in-law didn't feel that way. Otherwise, I wouldn't have four intelligent, handsome, talented grandsons to dote over and play golf with. I am also glad my mama didn't feel that way. Otherwise, my grandsons would have to play golf with somebody else.

After years of trying, proponents will finally get a chance to vote on creating the city of Sandy Springs and pull out of unincorporated Fulton County, where the area serves as a cash cow for the county. Voters might want to read the details of the referendum carefully. After the Keystone Kops routine that followed the recent killings in Fulton County, county officials may try to throw in their sheriff at no additional cost.

Republicans also passed an ethics law that sets up a committee of legislators to examine potential conflicts-of-interest of other legislators. That's like having the fox guard the henhouse. But to their credit, the GOP did pass some kind of ethics legislation. That's more than the Democrats ever did.

What was disappointing about the session was the clumsy way in which Republicans went about trying to close off details about state government operations from you, the taxpayer. Some of their efforts went down in well-deserved flames, but several bills passed. One allows governments to keep private the names and telephone numbers of all public employees in city, county and state government. Another allows university foundations to keep private the names of donors and the amounts they contribute.

Republicans seem unrepentant about their efforts to hide your business from you. Gov. Perdue was quoted after the session as saying that he wants to resurrect House Bill 218 next year, which calls for withholding economic development details from the public until a deal is struck. If any of the governor's advisers are reading this, you may want to suggest to the boss that secrecy in government is not exactly a good issue on which to run for re-election. It is not worth the effort. The news media will eat him alive if he tries. Don't say I didn't warn you.

I am going to give the Republican members of the General Assembly some take-it-or-leave-it advice, too. All the chambers of commerce, big corporations and deep-pocketed developers in the state can't get you re-elected if rank-and-file Georgia voters perceive that you are in bed with special interests. Voters got tired of the Democrats' high-handedness, and they can get tired of you, too. They didn't elect you to do business behind closed doors. Voters, before the legislators return next year, have them explain to you in sawmill English why the sudden urgent need for secrecy. Then share with them your own secret: This isn't their government. It's yours. You will be doing them a big favor.