

December 3, 2007

UNDERDOG DEMOCRATS INTEND TO BE MAJOR PLAYER IN NEXT LEGISLATIVE SESSION

A couple of weeks ago I visited with Georgia House Majority Leader Jerry Keen (R-St. Simons) to get his views on the upcoming legislative session. Last week, I stopped by to see what House Minority Leader DuBose Porter (D-Dublin) had to say about things. Porter is co-owner and editor of the Dublin Courier-Herald, one of the papers in the state that publishes this column. He didn't seem to mind my grilling him, and I didn't mind doing it.

Porter is one of the genuinely nice people I have met in politics. He no doubt has some people who disagree with his political positions, but I can't imagine that he has many enemies. That is quite a contrast for state Democrat loyalists who had to endure the disastrous slash-and-burn political reign of former State Democratic Party chair Bobby Kahn. Kahn makes enemies like China makes lead toys.

During the Wrath of Kahn, Democrats lost control of the Legislature and the governor's office for the first time in the state's history. (Like all loyal Southerners, I don't know what happened during Reconstruction, and I don't care.) Today, the GOP enjoys a 22-member advantage in the 180-member Georgia House of Representatives. Porter says, "We allowed the Republicans to define who we were, and we forgot that a lot of new people had moved into Georgia that didn't know of our accomplishments." He's being kind.

Today's Democratic legislators, by and large, are either urban and minority, or white and rural. Not a whole lot of representation in the fast-growing suburbs. Porter says that these divergent demographics aren't as big an issue as they are made out to be: "The main thing is that we agree on the core issues." The "core issues" sounded somewhat like the list Keen had given me: water management, health care and transportation, but with two notable differences.

"I want to see education higher on the list in the next session," Porter said, "and I want the Republicans to restore the funding cuts they made to public education and other critically important programs, like mental health." Porter says more than \$1.3 billion has been cut from the state's education formula over the past four years, and with Georgia sitting on a \$1.4 billion surplus, now is the time to put the money back. Otherwise, he says, local school districts have no choice but to ask for more taxes to cover the ongoing shortfall.

Not surprisingly, Porter doesn't think much of House Speaker Glenn Richardson's plan to eliminate property taxes while expanding taxes on sales, uses and services. "Remember," he says, "the tax code says you can't deduct sales taxes if you itemize your taxes, and more than 40 percent of Georgians do. If you eliminate property tax deductions, we will be sending an additional one billion dollars straight to the federal government." Porter also doesn't like the state redistributing collected taxes to the local governments. "Government works best the closer it is to the people," he says.

Porter does agree with his counterpart Keen that water management is going to be a major issue in the upcoming session, and that it won't be as much a Democrat vs. Republican issue as a tussle with the Atlanta suburbs. He gives high marks to Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin for her efforts to fix the city's longtime water problems. Interestingly, he sees a developing alliance of North Georgia counties, rural South Georgia and the City of Atlanta opposing the out-of-control (my term, not his) suburban Atlanta counties and their compliant, developer-dominated county commissions. "Where are these counties going to get their water for new development?" he asks. "They may think they will be able to 'borrow' it from less-developed counties, and that isn't going to happen."

Suffice it to say, Porter and the Democrats plan to be a major influence in what happens in the upcoming session. Remember that Gov. Perdue and the Republican legislators finished the last session in a major squabble, and I suspect there are some lingering bruised feelings that will carry over to this session. Porter intends to keep his disparate crowd united and thus able to affect key legislation. This is one nice guy who doesn't intend to finish last.