

March 8, 2010

PERDUE HORSING AROUND WITH BUDGET PROPOSALS

In the midst of one of the worst economic crises in memory, the Georgia General Assembly has to make some extremely difficult financial decisions. I don't envy them their job.

To make their challenge even harder, up pops Gov. Sonny Perdue with some budget add-ons. This time we aren't talking about concrete fishponds. While teachers are being furloughed, state employees laid off and budgets slashed to the bone, news reports say our chief executive desires to spend \$9 million to finish a horse show complex at the fairgrounds in Houston County. He also has \$67 million proposed for a rural economic development program that includes over a half-million dollar grant to move Little League Baseball Inc. to (where else?) Houston County.

There's more. The former veterinarian wants \$7.7 million for a new building at the UGA vet school. Knowing that the school is currently packed to the gills and then some, that potential expenditure is worthy of consideration. But not \$10 million to help move the College Football Hall of Fame to Atlanta after it fumbled opportunities in South Bend and Kings Mill, Ohio.

The reasoning coming out of the governor's office for the pork projects is that the expenditures will help "economic development." Hog wash.

You want to talk economic development? According to a study by the Atlanta Regional Council for Higher Education (ARCHE), Georgia college graduates average twice the income — and half the unemployment — of high school graduates. On average, college graduates pay 72 percent more in state and local taxes than non-graduates.

ARCHE says one-fourth of Georgia adults who did not finish high school live in poverty and 86 percent of prisoners in Georgia did not continue education beyond high school. Their incarceration costs you and me nearly \$800 million annually, the report states. I could go on but I think you get the drift.

How does one attend college and successfully attain a degree and contribute their tax dollars to a state in bad need of every dime available? They generally come through a proficient K-12 feeder system. I am not convinced that a horse park in Houston County does much to improve public education in our state. Also, I doubt seriously that a high-tech firm will move its headquarters to Atlanta just to be near O.J. Simpson's chin strap.

In the meantime, public education is getting sliced and diced and no one seems able to stop the bleeding. I spoke recently to the Georgia PTA during their visit to the Legislature. In a profession that has more special interest groups than a yard dog has fleas, nobody sees public education in the broad perspective better than citizen-volunteers in the PTA.

The Georgia PTA is tracking close to 100 pieces of legislation having to do with public education in the House and Senate this session. Some bills are good, some are bad and few are just plain ugly, including Rep. Timothy Bearden's (R-Villa Rica) bill (HB 615) that would allow concealed weapons to be brought into public schools, among other places. Sen. Majority Leader Chip Rogers (R-Woodstock) told me he wants to get government out of our schools and Bearden wants government to allow concealed weapons into our schools. Am I missing something here?

The truth is that education in Georgia lags near the bottom of the national barrel because, despite the rhetoric from our politicians, our state doesn't have a cohesive plan for improving public education and there is no entity or individual that seems able to change that perception.

Where is State School Superintendent Kathy Cox? Does she have a vision for public education that we the citizens can rally around and tell our legislators what we want our schools to be instead of vice versa? She may have the greatest plan since Pontius was a pilot, but I don't know what it is and I doubt you do, either.

In the meantime, teachers are getting furloughed and students could soon be packing heat in the classroom. While all of this is going on, Sonny Perdue wants to build a horse barn with our tax dollars. Even the horses have to be embarrassed.