Rural Georgia wins big as session ends

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Bob Andres | Atlanta Journal-Constitution via Associated Press

House members toss papers in the air as Sine Die was proclaimed shortly after midnight. Thursday was the 40th and final day of the 2018 General Assembly.

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ATLANTA – The legislative session gave rural Georgia micro hospitals, a new health care-focused think tank and a sizable down payment on economic development initiatives tailored for the state’s beleaguered small towns.

But other proposals – including a plan to empower electric cooperatives to provide broadband – just ended up as fodder for the messy tradition that marks the end of every legislative session in Georgia.

Some ideas – such as one offering a tax break to people who move to rural counties – never got off the ground.

Most of the key measures designed to boost rural parts of the state succeeded, even if they squeaked by after a self-imposed midnight deadline.

“I don’t think rural Georgia has had a better session than it had this year,” House Speaker David Ralston, R-Blue Ridge, told reporters shortly after the session concluded early Friday morning.
Lawmakers formed a legislative panel last year dubbed the House Rural Development Council, which proposed a slate of legislative fixes for rural Georgia. Ralston said the progress made in the first year of the council’s existence surpassed his expectations.

The council pushed forward health-care and broadband bills that ultimately passed, as well as a proposal for a new economic-development resource called the Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation. Lawmakers included $1.7 million in the budget to fund the center.

Lawmakers also created a deputy commissioner for rural Georgia position – a job former state representative Amy Carter has already filled – within the state Department of Economic Development.

A new academic center and council focused on improving health care – with an emphasis on rural health care – came out of this session from the Senate. About $1.9 million was put in the budget for the center and council.

Lawmakers also upped a tax credit for donations made to rural hospitals, adopted mandatory training requirements for local hospital officials and established a grant program that will cover malpractice insurance premiums for physicians working in underserved areas of the state.

They also approved a tax break for short-line rail owners who spend money on improving their tracks and put a stop to metro Atlanta cities banning the use of wood in some high-rise buildings.

“It’s cool to be rural again,” Rep. Terry England, R-Auburn, who co-chairs the House Rural Development Council that was started last year, said at a recent event announcing a new T-shirt that was sewn and made from cotton grown in Georgia.

Rep. Jason Shaw, R-Lakeland, who sponsored the rural prosperity center proposal, put it another way.

“I like to say, ‘You’ve got it while you can,’” Shaw said Thursday. “You’ve got to get it done while you’ve got – in this case – the votes to do it.”

But some of the biggest wins for rural Georgia are found in the budget. Most notably, Gov. Nathan Deal included $26 million to extend runways at 11 airports to accommodate corporate jets, although money for smaller rural initiatives can be found throughout the budget.

There are measures that will affect all Georgians. Lawmakers fully funded the state’s education formula for the first time since 2002 and decided to use a windfall created by the federal tax bill to cut the income tax rate for the first time in decades.

“If you can’t get re-elected on the things that we did this year, you probably don’t need to be here in the first place,” Deal joked in a brief speech to the Senate.

Rep. Sam Watson, R-Moultrie, sponsored measures that will designate about $20 million a year in existing revenue for conservation projects statewide, such as upgrading state parks in rural areas. Watson said he hopes the outdoor spaces will become attractions that will bring more money into these communities. Voters must still approve this idea.
“Definitely from the budget perspective, it was a huge success,” Watson said of the session. “And we all know a lot of it goes back to money.”

But there were also letdowns. A measure that would have handed electric cooperatives the legal authority to provide broadband service died in the Senate.

Watson, who chairs the rural caucus, said U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue told rural lawmakers this week the federal government intends to funnel money into cooperatives to expand broadband access in rural America.

“I was disappointed we didn’t get the EMC part of it because that actually will make a big difference in providing broadband in rural areas, if we had given them the legal ability to do that,” said Rep. Jay Powell, R-Camilla, who sponsored the bill and who is the other co-chair of the House Rural Development Council.

Another broadband bill sponsored by Powell did beat the buzzer. The measure creates a framework for funding broadband expansion through a grant program, although it is not currently funded. The bill also establishes a program that certifies cities and counties meeting certain guidelines as a “broadband ready community.”

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