

**City of Savannah**  
**2022 Legislative Agenda**

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**1. Hotel-Motel Tax**

Authorize the City of Savannah to set its Hotel-Motel tax rate from 6%-8% by moving out of a retired authorization paragraph into the updated authorization paragraph passed in 2008.

**BACKGROUND**

The City of Savannah would like to move from its currently grandfathered State authorization paragraph permitting Hotel-Motel tax at the 6% rate, into the updated State authorization paragraph allowing City Council to set the Hotel-Motel tax rate between 6% and 8%.

This action has already been taken by 85% of the communities in Georgia that collect a hotel-motel tax. Of those communities that have moved to the new authorization paragraph, 97 have set their rate at 8%, including Atlanta, Columbus, Macon, Rome, Albany, Vidalia, Milledgeville, Kennesaw, Milledgeville, and Jesup among many others. Several other communities are higher than Savannah's 6% including local jurisdictions such as Tybee Island and Thunderbolt.

**2. Confiscated Weapons**

Allow local governments the ability to sell or destroy confiscated weapons when the rightful owner cannot be determined or located.

**BACKGROUND**

State law passed in 2012 requires all law enforcement agencies in Georgia to auction off the guns they confiscate if they cannot return them to the lawful owners. Gun-related violence is the most pressing public safety issue in Savannah today. There are far too many guns on Savannah's streets; Savannah Police seizes hundreds of guns per year. Requiring law enforcement to reintroduce confiscated weapons into the community works against the efforts made by our law enforcement professionals.

The City requests that the law be changed to allow local jurisdictions the option to destroy confiscated weapons or sell them at auction.

**3. Workforce Housing Initiatives**

- A. Long-term Lease Agreements to help lower housing development costs
  - Allow Cities in enter into long-term lease agreements to help lower housing development costs and make housing more affordable –providing a substantial benefit to the public.

**BACKGROUND**

State law currently limits the amount of time a City may lease property to two five-year terms. This statute limits cities' ability to partner with developers to drive down rental rates by reducing land costs. An exemption from this law would allow Cities to lease real estate for at least 20 years for housing development that provides a substantial public benefit.

- B. Expand Enterprise Zones to include an option that provides incentives for workforce housing
  - Expand enterprise zones to include an option that provides incentives for workforce housing and expands eligible geographical areas to those that are not just distressed but are experiencing housing challenges.

**BACKGROUND**

This idea to amend the EZ legislation grew from the Housing Savannah Action Plan which calls for the adoption of Urban Enterprise Zone (UEZ) legislation to be amended to include Savannah. Other UEZ links government-offered incentives, such as property tax abatement, fee waivers and other benefits, to the development of workforce housing. It also includes larger geographic areas that can cover several neighborhoods, including neighborhoods that are gentrifying, and specific parcels within approved areas.

Current State Enterprise Zone (EZ) legislation does not require that housing developed with EZ incentives be affordable, only that “value of the improvement exceeds the value of the land by a ratio of five to one[.]” Moreover, EZ boundaries are typically limited to economically distressed commercial corridors. As the current state legislation and constitutional authority are focused on providing incentives and tax exemptions based primarily on employment and “creating job opportunities”.

The above-referenced benefits could be important tools for revitalizing Savannah’s neighborhoods, ensuring housing opportunities remain reasonably priced and available to residents at or below area median income levels, and encouraging the development of inner-city property acquired through the 1K-in-10 initiative

C. Allow Savannah to use Housing Opportunity Bonds

- Provide mechanism for Savannah to use ‘Housing Opportunity Bonds’ which can fund a wide variety of housing activities, such as: assisting with the homelessness; promoting residential rental development and financing home repair through home construction and home purchase projects undertaken by individuals, non-profits and for-profits.

**BACKGROUND**

Current legislation only authorizes the local creation of an Urban Residential Finance Authority (URFA) in municipalities with a population of 350,000 or more. URFA has broad authority to issue Housing Opportunity Bonds and conduct a variety of workforce housing initiatives/programs.

Georgia’s only URFA has issued Housing Opportunity Bonds used to fund a wide variety of housing activities, such as: assisting with the homelessness, promoting residential rental development, and financing home repair through home construction and home purchase projects undertaken by individuals, non-profits and for-profits.

In contrast, revenue bonds issued by the Housing Authority of Savannah are generally restricted to only large multi-family affordable rental developments, which must be repaid by project rental income. As such, a local URFA or other bonding agency could provide significantly more authority and resources to encourage the development of housing in accordance with the Housing Savannah Action Plan.

Only one municipality, Atlanta, is presently permitted to establish its own URFA.

**4. Clarity to the Taxpayer Bill of Rights Advertisement**

The “Taxpayer Bill of Rights” is designed to notify the public that the overall digest has increased in value. However, the wording of the notice fails to differentiate the difference between increased millage rates and increased assessed value. Furthermore, it inadequately explains that an overall increase in assessed values does not mean that all parcels increased in value.

**5. Logistics Technology Corridor**

Adopt economic incentives to enhance Georgia’s Logistics Technology Corridor, which includes logistical technology job training, an innovation center, and a foundation for the region to become the global leader of logistics innovation.

Furthermore, formalize the current Savannah Logistics Technology Corridor Task Force, which would promote and foster the growth and activities within the corridor.

**BACKGROUND**

The Savannah Logistics Technology Corridor was developed to help promote the Savannah region as a leader in logistical technology. The corridor boundaries have been established by the state and \$400,000 was allocated to support the planning efforts of the corridor in the fiscal year 2020 budget. This year, Savannah will advocate for state incentives to further promote investment and growth within the region.

**6. Local Control of Monuments**

Amend of Georgia State laws preventing local governments from altering and/or removing monuments and memorials that no longer serve the needs of their constituents.

**BACKGROUND**

The City of Savannah has a well-established public process for the approval and erection of public monuments, memorial and markers through the Savannah-Chatham County Historic Site and Monument Commission and Savannah City Council. These processes allow for public comment and participation at the local level to ensure that monuments selected represent the community. Currently, Georgia State laws restrict local municipalities from making similar decisions, with the input of their citizens, regarding the alteration or removal of some of their monuments that no longer serve the needs of the community. Local history is conveyed at the local level and these decisions need to be made by the community in which these monuments and memorials reside.

**7. Savannah Development and Renewal Authority**

Lower the required number of board members for the Savannah Development and Renewal Authority from 25 to 17 and update quorum requirements

**BACKGROUND**

The Savannah Development and Renewal Authority was created by state law to revitalize commercial corridors. State law requires the board to have 25 members. This initiative would lower the required number of board members to a more manageable size.

**HOME RULE ITEMS - Local control of our existing laws and policies**

This section outlines current laws and policies we have identified that we need to protect from state involvement or overreach. As a local government, we believe we know what works best for Savannah and request the state allow us to legislate our own solutions.

**Minimum Wage**

Support efforts to allow local municipalities to set minimum wage requirements in accordance with federal law.

**Short-Term Vacation Rentals**

Support Home Rule regulation of short-term rentals as necessary for quality of life, public safety, and a competitive lodging marketplace. Support the legal use of properties as short-term or vacation rentals by individuals licensed to do business and pay the appropriate state and local taxes.

**BACKGROUND**

Short-term vacation rentals are popular in certain areas of the state, which often creates commercial competition inside residential neighborhoods and can create nuisances and parking issues for nearby residents. Individuals rent sofas, rooms or entire properties through online websites such as VRBO and AirBnB. While as a whole this industry is rapidly growing, the dynamics and pressures within each community differ dramatically. Given this diversity, a one-size-fits-all approach to regulation of short-term vacation rental is destined for failure. Legislation has been filed in the past that would prohibit local jurisdictions from regulating the short-term vacation rental industry. Recommend that the Legislature follow the recommendation of the Georgia House of Representatives Study Committee on Short-Term Vacation Rental Providers that concluded in 2015 that “regulations regarding the operation of short-term rentals be made at the local level.”

**Abandoned Shopping Cart Ordinance**

Oppose State legislation that would preempt local regulations designed to create common-sense procedures that incentivize retail stores to be more accountable for their shopping carts that are often abandoned by customers on City rights-of-way, causing persistent neighborhood blight. Savannah’s local ordinance passed in 2018 has been successful in lowering the number of shopping carts abandoned on City rights-of-way

**ADVOCACY ITEMS**

This section outlines items that may benefit citizens of the City of Savannah but are not directly related to municipal services or control.

**1. Anti-Gentrification**

Explore and support legislation and programs that help prevent displacement of residents.

Ideas include the following:

- An anti-gentrification exemption could apply to property owners who live on the property as their primary residence and freeze property taxes.
- The property owner would be economically considered low-income.
- The exemption would cease when the homeowner's income increases and exceeds the low-income threshold, or when the property changes ownership

## **2. Rent Control/Management**

Explore and support legislation and programs that support stabilizing rental rates for low-income residents.

- The idea is to avoid low-income tenants' rent from rapidly increasing to the point of becoming unaffordable.
- Rent Control/Management (RC/M) could apply to low-income renters who live within the 2-mile radius of a Federal Opportunity Zone, a State Opportunity Zone, or a State Enterprise Zone.

## **3. Support funding for Safe House Facilities and programs addressing the abuse and commercial sex exploitation of children**

Support state efforts to assist in the prevention of the abuse of commercial sex exploitation of children. Additionally, help address the shortfall of safe house facilities within Savannah and our region.

## **4. Support Sustainability Initiatives**

A. Eliminate or raise the Public Service Commission's cap on monthly netting for behind-the-meter solar programs

### **BACKGROUND**

Customers who own solar systems are eligible to sell excess energy to the utility grid. In some cases, customers can receive the full retail rate that they pay to buy electricity from the utility for their energy. In other cases, customers only receive the wholesale rate, which is much lower than the retail rate. This first compensation model is called Monthly Netting. Monthly Netting allows customers to net all the energy their solar system produces over the course of a month against all the energy they get from the grid that month. This means that any extra solar energy that is produced during the day can be used to offset energy drawn from the grid at night or during bad weather. Monthly Netting allows customers to offset more of their energy use with renewable energy, which reduces their energy bills and increases the resiliency of the grid. Unfortunately, Georgia currently has a cap on Monthly Netting that severely limits the number of customers that can participate.

When the Monthly Netting cap is full, customers only receive the "avoided cost" or wholesale rate for their energy. This wholesale rate is much lower than the rate customers pay to get energy from the utility. This arrangement effectively devalues solar energy, reduces the affordability of solar power, and lengthens the amount of time in which citizens can achieve a return on their solar investment. The current participation limits create a less resilient energy infrastructure throughout the state. A bipartisan bill was introduced in March of 2021 on this topic but never received a hearing.

B. Support legislation to enable access to community solar programs.

### **BACKGROUND**

Rooftop solar programs are not always available to all individuals due to tenants renting a property, shaded roofs, or weight capacity issues (ex. mobile homes). Community solar programs provide access to solar power by allowing individuals to purchase, lease or rent a panel that can provide renewable energy and credit their electricity bill. In Georgia, new legislation is required in order to allow for community solar programs to become available.