

**City of Savannah
2023 Legislative Agenda**

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%-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 dispose of 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 be returned 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. 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.”**

4. Expansion of Allowable Speed Camera Zones

- **“Expand the allowable zones for the use of speed camera enforcement to include high pedestrian, bicycle or crash areas.”**

BACKGROUND

The Georgia Legislature permits installation of speed and safety enforcement cameras within school zones. Violations can only occur on a school day during the time in which instructional classes are taking place and one hour before such classes are scheduled to begin and for one hour after such classes have concluded when such violations are in excess of ten miles per hour over the speed limit. Expansion of these zones would take advantage of new federal guidance issued in February 2022, in which states can now use Federal Highway dollars for roadway safety programs such as automated traffic enforcement.

5. Property Tax Freeze for Low-Income Residents

- **“A property tax freeze will apply to property owners who rent their property to individuals that meet a low-income threshold. The exemption shall freeze property taxes at the current level and cease**

when the homeowner raises rent beyond a particular level or the renters income increases and exceeds the established threshold.”

6. Workforce Housing Initiatives

- **“Expand incentives for enterprise zones to include workforce housing components and expand eligible geographical areas to those that are not just distressed but are also 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 approved in Atlanta to be amended to include Savannah. Atlanta’s 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.

EZ boundaries are typically limited to economically distressed commercial corridors. Current state legislation and constitutional authority is 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 affordable and available to modest and low-income persons, and encouraging the development of inner-city property acquired through the 1K-in-10 initiative.

- **“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, including:

- Providing financing for single and multi-family developments,
- Providing financing for housing, without regard to targeting for eligible households,
- Coordinating housing financing with lending institutions,
- Administering any federal, state, county, or municipal program designed to assist in lowering the cost of housing for eligible households, and
- Issuing bonds for residential housing purposes.

Georgia’s only URFA in Atlanta has already issued Housing Opportunity Bonds used to fund a wide variety of housing activities, such as: addressing 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.

7. Public/Private Land Lease Agreements

- **“Allow cities in enter into long-term lease agreements in order to lower land costs on projects that provide 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 the meaningful capital investments lease holders are willing to investment into the public property. Additionally, it prohibits cities’ ability to partner with developers to drive down land costs which could be make project with substantial public benefits more feasible. An exemption from this law would allow Cities to lease real estate for recreational, workforce housing, or stormwater projects that provide a substantial public benefit for up to 20 years, with the option to extend such leases up to another 20 years.

8. Clean Energy & Resilience Initiative

- **“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.

9. Rental Growth Protection

- **“The Rental Growth Protection applies to low-income renters who live within a Federal, State, or Local economically incentivized area. Rental increases will be a scaled based on investments made into properties by the property owner.”**

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.

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.”