

**City of Savannah
2020 Legislative Agenda**

LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

1. Confiscated Weapons

Allow local governments to choose whether they'll sell confiscated weapons at auction or have them destroyed.

BACKGROUND

State law passed in 2012 requires all law enforcement agencies in Georgia to auction off to licensed gun dealers most of 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.

2. Common-Sense Gun Measures to Reduce Gun Violence

Savannah City Council urges the members of Savannah's Legislative Delegation to support common-sense gun-safety legislation, including:

- universal background checks for all gun buyers;
- "red flag" or "extreme risk protective order" legislation to create a legal process for the temporary removal of firearms from individuals deemed to pose an imminent risk of violence to themselves or others;
- bans on assault weapons, high-capacity magazines, armor-piercing ammunition, and bump stocks;
- legislation granting localities the authority to prohibit or restrict the possession, transportation or carrying of firearms into public buildings, publicly approved events, on other property owned by a locality or within designated festival zones.

BACKGROUND:

On September 12, 2019, Savannah City Council passed a Resolution supporting common-sense gun measures to reduce gun violence. Ongoing political inaction forces City Council to confront the limited ability of local governments to enact common-sense gun safety measures in our communities, including in our own government buildings, libraries, recreation centers, parks, public festivals, and public spaces. Savannah City Council recognizes that our inability to enact common-sense gun safety measures in our community has a significant impact on our core responsibility to create a safe and resilient city for every resident, worker, and visitor in Savannah, Georgia.

3. Private Solid Waste Disposal fees

Amend allowable uses for HOST fees from private solid waste disposal facilities to allow for use of funds on recycling efforts.

BACKGROUND

When a municipal solid waste disposal facility is operated by private enterprise, the host local government is authorized to impose a surcharge of \$2.50 per ton. However, those funds can only be expended for solid waste purposes.

This amendment would allow the surcharge revenue to be expended for recycling operations, programs, or educational efforts.

4. Sovereign Immunity

The City requests that the State provide municipalities with the same sovereign immunity as is provided to counties and the state.

At a minimum, Savannah requests sovereign immunity be granted in cases involving trees in urban communities. Savannah's unique circumstance involves a large aging urban forest within a densely populated area creating a distinct liability that could result in unintended consequences.

BACKGROUND

Municipalities act for the public good and respond to the public need and therefore, must provide a broad range of services and functions regardless of how much liability exposure may be involved. The exposure of municipal treasuries to tort liability must be limited to protect taxpayers. To be able to continue providing services at a reasonable cost, cities require the protection offered by county sovereign immunity or the State Tort Claims Act.

5. Savannah Development and Renewal Authority

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

BACKGROUND

The Savannah Development and Renewal Authority was created by state law to revitalize downtown 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.

6. Smoke Alarms in Rental Properties

Update Penalty in State Fire Code for not providing working Smoke Alarms in rental properties after first warning.

BACKGROUND

State Fire Code mandates a smoke detector be installed in all rental properties in accordance with the manufacturer's recommendations. After an initial warning for failure to maintain a smoke detector in good working order, a \$25 dollar fine maybe issued. A recent fire death in Savannah highlighted the need and impact of not providing working smoke alarms. Increasing the fine will further incentivize property owners to provide and maintain smoke alarms within rental properties.

7. Logistics Technology Corridor

Adopt economic incentives to enhance Georgia's logistics technology corridor which includes logistical technology job training, an innovation center, and foundation for the region becoming the global leader of logistics innovation. The incentives include:

- A Tax Credit to assist experienced technologists repaying their student loans provided they reside or work within the corridors.
- A bill to permit the transfer of R&D Tax credits and Operating Losses between technology companies located within the corridors.
- A reinstatement of the previous Angel Investor Tax Credit, but dedicated to companies within the Technology corridors.
- A Cluster Grant program to facilitate educational initiatives and industry initiatives within the corridors.

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.

8. Non-Property Tax Revenue Options to Rollback Property Taxes

Explore the different revenue streams to help lower property taxes.

BACKGROUND

Savannah has one of the highest property tax rates in the region. Staff continues to explore options to lower our property tax rate while continuing to properly maintain our aging infrastructure.

Other Georgia cities have used local penny sales tax solutions such as a Municipal Option Sales Tax or a Public Safety Sales Tax to help fund city services whiling lowering property tax rates.

9. Commercial Property Tax Assessments Annual Growth Cap

Explore a mechanism to prevent large swings in the commercial property tax assessments.

BACKGROUND

In 2017, the City of Savannah joined the Savannah Area Chamber of Commerce and other organizations to support measures that limited unanticipated large-percentage swings in annual commercial property tax increases. That year, the Legislature passed a bill sponsored by State Rep. Ron Stephens that authorized the use of income and expense data supplied by the property owner to be utilized in the assessment of commercial property. Other measures that put a cap on the percentage increase of commercial assessments from year to year have gained no traction in the Legislature and have been opposed by other municipalities and the Georgia Municipal Association.

10. Staggered Term Limits for Savannah City Council

Explore the implementation of additional term limits and staggered election terms for Savannah City Council Members.

11. Safe House Facilities and Support for Abused and Commercial Sex Exploitation of Children

Support funding and expand efforts to establish secure facilities, services, and prevention effects to address both the immediate and long term needs of victims of Commercial Child Sexual Exploitation and Domestic Abuse.

BACKGROUND

This effort is aligned with Governor Kemp’s Human & Child Sex Trafficking awareness campaign. Enforcement of and investigations into human trafficking cases have increased, and is a big problem in the Coastal Empire. Savannah’s youth are especially at risk due to our designation as a port city and proximity to major highways and the airport.

374 girls are commercially sexually exploited each month in the state of Georgia. Services for aftercare are limited and desperately needed in the coastal region.

12. Increase Small Business Personal Property Tax Exemption

Increase the tax exemption on small businesses personal property from \$7,500 to \$10,000.

BACKGROUND

Georgia statutes and regulations require that all businesses pay taxes on tangible personal property. Business personal property consists of items used in the normal course of business that are movable and not permanently affixed to the real estate such as furniture, machinery, equipment, computers, inventory, vehicles, etc. The current exemption amount is \$7,500. Savannah supports exploring the fiscal impact of increasing this exemption to help small businesses be successful.

13. Port Container Fee

Explore pathways, impacts, and implementation mechanisms for a port container fee.

BACKGROUND

Both the Georgia Senate Research Office and Savannah City Attorney's Office are researching the legality, potential impact, and additional recommendations of this request. The Georgia Port Authority is not within the City of Savannah’s city limits. Staff conducted a review of other port communities and found that container fees typically exist in communities where the port is owned and operated by the city or county for which the port is jurisdictionally bound. State operated ports, like Savannah and Charleston, do not have port container fees. If a container fee were to be assessed, it would likely be assessed by the State. Staff is continuing to explore this issue and is reaching out to Garden City, Port Wentworth, and Pooler for further discussion and collaboration.

14. Review and update the Local Maintenance & Improvement Grant (LMIG)

Support the review of the distribution formula by Georgia Department of Transportation to work with local officials to include impacts of port activity on local infrastructure.

BACKGROUND

Currently, LMIG funds are allocated by a formula based on road miles and population. State law authorizes the GDOT Planning Director the discretion to set the formula and to “include considerations of paved and unpaved lane miles and vehicle miles traveled and may include population, employment, and local funding matches available, as well as other factors as may be determined by the division and the director.” Currently, the formula is based on 1/3 population from yearly census estimates and 2/3 local.

15. Behavioral Health Crisis Centers

Support continued funding of behavioral health crisis centers to help divert the mental ill from incarceration.

16. Housing and Urban Development Funds

Seek increased funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). These funds go towards Georgia’s Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program, which is administered by the Georgia Department of Community Affairs (DCA).

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 over reach. As a local government, we believe we know what works best for Savannah and request the state allow us to legislate our own solutions.

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 right-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.

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.”

Local Control of Building Design Standards

Support local governments’ ability to determine what type of design standards are appropriate for their communities. These standards may include setback limits, materials, height restrictions, and other factors that are mainstays in local zoning laws.

Oppose Any Prohibition of Fees on Property Tax Bills

Support local governments' ability to control what items can be placed on property tax bills. Property tax bills are an efficient way for citizens to receive notification of what fees may be due for particular city services, all within a single document or notice.

BACKGROUND

Cities may elect to impose a fee for a municipal service rather than incorporate the cost of the service into the general property tax base. Fees, instead of taxes, are often used when there is a significant difference in the amount of services required among taxpayers. A prohibition on local fiscal authorities from listing any nontax related fees or assessments, such as storm water utility fees or fire assessment fees, on a property tax bill would lower collection rates of such fees and impose significant additional costs on the City to manage billing and collection of such fees for municipal services. Legislation has been introduced in recent years to prevent fees from being included on property tax bills. Request that such legislation continue to be rejected.