



GEORGIA SENATE DEMOCRATIC CAUCUS

2021 LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

Economy

- Raise the minimum wage to \$15/hour

Georgia's minimum wage is less than the federal minimum wage, so wages are largely controlled by the federal minimum wage of \$7.25/hr. The federal government raised the minimum wage starting all the way back in 2007. Due to inflation, \$7.25 in 2020 dollars is only the equivalent of \$5.78 back in 2007 or barely more than the prior minimum wage of \$5.15.

Additionally, a higher minimum wage is extremely effective economic stimulus because low wage workers spend their money in the local community and with local businesses. It's time to make Georgia's minimum wage a living wage.

- Expand rural broadband so all Georgians have access to high speed internet.

Many rural Georgians lack access to high speed internet. Communities with poor access to broadband will struggle to attract businesses as many businesses these days need high speed internet. The pandemic has only exacerbated this issue as more people are working and learning from home. Video services like Zoom require high speed internet. Finally, telehealth is a promising technology to provide health care in underserved areas, but it also requires a good broadband connection.

In response, the caucus will introduce legislation to create a pilot program got the state to install and operate fiber in unserved and underserved areas.

- Legalize and regulate retail marijuana to reduce the number of people in jails and prisons and to bring in much needed tax revenue to fund schools and infrastructure.

All the gloom and doom predictions haven't occurred in states with legal marijuana. We're in a budget deficit, and marijuana tax revenue would be in the hundreds of millions with a tax structure like Colorado.

No longer allowing police to search vehicles because they claim they smell unburnt marijuana would be a massive improvement. Obviously, the smell of

burnt marijuana would still be probable cause to administer a sobriety test.

This would be done by a constitutional amendment to ensure the revenue isn't redirected away from education and infrastructure and to ensure the voters have a chance to vote on it. It would also release people in jail on simple possession charges and expunge all existing possession charges.

- Implement paid sick and family leave so people can afford to care for sick family members.

Georgia does not have a paid family leave law on the books this means that a person who is suffering from an illness or has a sick relative that needs care has to choose between working and making money or caring for their health or their relative's health. This is especially burdensome on lower income folks who might not make enough at work to even pay for third party care.

Our plan would allow anyone who takes off due to their own illness or disability, the illness or disability of a family member, or to bond with a new child to receive up to 55% of their previous year's pay for up to six weeks.

It would be paid for by a maximum 1.5% payroll tax split between the employee and employer that could be reduced in future years if the fund is funded to 145% of the prior year's disbursements. This fund would need to be created by a constitutional amendment.

- Create a state retirement plan for workers that don't already have retirement accounts through work.

Retirement accounts such as 401(k)s and IRAs are critical for any worker who hopes to be able to retire one day, but many employers do not offer those plans. However, when people have access to a plan and are automatically opted in, people tend to use the plan and save.

This legislation would create a state retirement plan to automatically enroll employees without employer provided plans in a Roth IRA. Employees would automatically be enrolled at a default rate set by the board overseeing the program, but the employee could opt out, lower the rate, or increase contributions up to the federal IRA maximum.

- Stimulate the economy and support families by creating child care scholarships so families never have to spend more than 7% of their income on child care.

Many families in Georgia, especially rural Georgia, struggle to work while

providing for their children. Many parents are unable to make the career moves they want, are forced into situations where they are underemployed, or have to drop out of the work force entirely.

This negatively affect's Georgia's economy with a 1.75 billion dollar of economic loss and 105 million tax dollars lost. This Scholarship intends to provide more funding to families so they can adequately care for their children while not face economic pressures, so that they can produce for the economy as a whole.

Providing affordable childcare is surprisingly affordable. Investing roughly an additional \$350 million in the CAPS would provide all families with affordable child care and provide child care to 63,000 more children while also providing a substantial boost to Georgia's economy and state revenues.

- Support seniors by mandating that state retirement systems provide a cost of living adjustment every year unless the state is in a fiscal emergency.

Right now, state retirees rarely get cost of living adjustments. Now that these people are retired, they're dependent on their pensions to keep up with the cost of living. State retirement funds are often underfunded, so fund managers tend to skip COLAs to minimize expenditures. Making COLAs the default would encourage the legislature to ensure plans are fully funded, both to allow for COLAs and to ensure the funds don't become underfunded to the point of becoming unsustainable down the road.

If the Governor declares a fiscal emergency when tax revenues decline by 3% year over year or month over month, the COLA can be suspended through the same process as earmarks passed under 2020 Amendment 1 can be suspended.

Equity

- Pass comprehensive police and criminal justice reform so everyone is treated the same regardless of race or other characteristics We will reintroduce the Georgia Justice Act to:
 - Require all police to wear and actually use body cameras. So much police violence has flown under the radar because nobody was filming
 - Limit police chases to situations involving kidnapping or imminent violence so that people, including other drivers on the road, aren't put in danger over minor offenses
 - Provide PTSD training for police so they know how to deal with traumatized people and don't cause additional trauma

- Prohibit racial profiling and require departments to record the details of every traffic stop
 - Ban rubber bullets for law enforcement to stop the brutal injuries caused by these weapons
 - Require police to intervene when another officer is using excessive force so that police hold themselves accountable
 - Ban chokeholds so that we don't have another murder like that of George Floyd
 - End militarized police so that our cities don't resemble war zones
 - Regulate law enforcement like any other regulated profession so that bad cops can't just get rehired at the next department over
 - Require police to sign police reports under penalty of perjury because lying on police reports is unacceptable
 - Require a special prosecutor in police prosecutions to eliminate the conflict of interest between a DA and the local police
 - Remove qualified immunity from officers so that victims of police violence can have their day in court
 - Limit no knock warrants to specific circumstances when necessary to avoid violence to eliminate the kind of situation that led to the murder of Breonna Taylor
 - Repeal the stand your ground law that encourages people to shoot first and ask questions later
 - Reduce marijuana penalties so that people don't come into contact with police over a minuscule crime
 - Allow felons who have completed their sentences to vote and participate in democracy
 - Repeal citizens' arrest because it is outdated and leads to people like Ahmaud Arbery getting killed
- Pass redistricting reform so that voters choose their legislators instead of legislators choosing their voters.

Right now, Georgia's legislative, congressional, and local district maps are drawn by the legislature with no oversight. This means that gerrymandering is absolutely rampant, which disenfranchises the minority party and minority voters. The fact that the state legislature and congressional delegation are so skewed in a swing state is stark evidence of that.

We would create an independent, bipartisan Citizens' Redistricting

Commission to draw maps. Maps would be drawn to respect the Voting Rights Act and minority voting rights, be geographically contiguous, follow county lines when possible, not split precincts, not be based on prior maps, and not be drawn to favor or disfavor a candidate, party, or any other person or group.

The Commission would be comprised of five Republicans, five Democrats, and four Independents. Anyone who had been a candidate, party staffer, political appointee, lobbyist, legislative staffer, or anyone who donated over \$2000 in an election cycle within the past ten years would not be allowed on the Commission.

- Expand access to the ballot through initiatives such as:
 - Same day voter registration
 - Automatic voter registration
 - An option to permanently vote by mail
 - A requirement that everyone early voting location have a dropbox
 - Allowing counties to start counting mail votes early so the winner is determined faster
 - Allow poll workers to be from any county

- Ensure oversight into spending, such as CARES Act money, to ensure money is distributed fairly.

There appear to have been significant inconsistencies in how CARES Act money was distributed across the state. The Caucus will call for an audit of CARES Act expenditures to see how money was distributed and then take corrective action based on the results of the audit.

- Improve accountability and oversight of tax credits and exemptions to ensure that they actually achieve their intended goals.

Recently there has been a promising bipartisan effort to analyze various tax credits and exemptions to ensure they are accomplishing their goals. It is easy for tax expenditures to just accumulate since they aren't budget line items each year like other expenditures. We hope to finally pass a comprehensive, bipartisan bill to analyze most tax expenditures to see if they are a smart use of funds.

- Pass true common sense gun reform such as requiring universal background checks and prohibiting all domestic violence offenders from possessing guns.

This legislation would close two loopholes related to firearm sales. The first would close the so-called gun show loophole that allows a transfer or sale of a firearm between two individuals without a background check. They do not need to occur at gun shows to be exempt from the background check requirement. The second would prohibit people on first offender probation for a domestic violence offense or subject to a restraining order for domestic violence from possessing firearms, just like currently applies to people with domestic violence convictions.

Health Care

- Expand Medicaid to cover almost 500,000 uninsured Georgians.

This legislation would require the state to expand Medicaid under the ACA. This requirement would only apply so long as the federal government continues to provide 90% or more funding as established in the ACA.

Medicaid expansion under the ACA is one of the most important policy decisions facing the state. It would create non-exportable jobs and provide health care to 400-500,000 Georgians. Medicaid expansion would only impose a minimal cost to the state budget while having a massively beneficial impact on the state economy and saving lives.

- Require proper ventilation in operating rooms so people aren't exposed to harmful surgical smoke.

Laser tools are increasingly being used to make incisions and cauterize wounds during surgery. This produces toxic smoke in the operating room. This legislation would require proper ventilation in the OR so people aren't exposed to harmful smoke.

- Expand nurse education to address the nursing shortage

Expand the loan forgiveness program for doctors and dentists that practice in rural areas to also cover nurses.

- Expand telemedicine and expand broadband so the communities that need telemedicine the most can access it.

Telehealth is a promising technology to provide health care in underserved

areas, but it also requires a good broadband connection.

- Provide free feminine products in schools.
- Allow inmates currently trained and working as firefighters and EMTs to continue doing those jobs upon release.

Many inmates in state prisons are trained to be firefighters and EMTs and work in those roles in the community while incarcerated. However, once they get out, their felony means they can't get work on the outside. Not only is it wasteful to train these people and then not let them work after release, a good job is one of the best factors to prevent recidivism.

- Combat maternal mortality by expanding Medicaid coverage to cover new mothers for a full year and create and fund rural birthing centers.

Georgia is one of the worst states in the country for maternal mortality. One of the best policies to improve outcomes is to provide coverage to women for up to a year after giving birth. Additionally, funding rural birthing centers at small, rural hospitals improves outcomes. Women who deliver at a birthing center have outcomes comparable to women that deliver at a fully fledged city hospital.

- Establish a true medical marijuana program so patients can legally obtain marijuana and allow all forms instead of limiting available treatments.

Low-THC CBD oil is legal to possess in Georgia, but the program doesn't go nearly far enough. Not all conditions respond to the Low-THC oil. Some conditions respond better to a different form of administration or a product that contains more THC. Additionally, our proposal would allow for legal, in-state production so that you can get your medicine without committing a crime, just like in most states with medical marijuana.

Education

- Establish a Community Schools program with state level grants for struggling schools to hire resource coordinators to find community resources to help students.

Community Schools programs use a school as a full service resource to target the underlying causes of failing schools. These schools would offer students academic and other support services outside of class time to mitigate poverty and other challenges that cause poor academic performance.

This legislation would create a grant program to establish Community School grants to hire resource coordinators to find existing resources that offer academic, health care, community involvement, and other similar programs.

- Adequately fund schools so that, at the very least, the full Quality Basic Education formula is fully funded.

As has become an unfortunate tradition in Georgia, when tax revenues declined due to the pandemic, the first thing the legislature did was cut education. There was no consideration of raising revenue or looking for other avenues to cut to protect schools. As schools struggle to deal with the current environment, they need more resources not fewer.

- Oppose attacks on public education such as school vouchers and attempts to punish schools for operating virtually during a pandemic.

Many private schools have remained open during the pandemic, while public schools have been closing. Without testing it's impossible to know how many outbreaks there are that don't get caught, but spread in schools has been shown to be a thing. Opponents of public education will use this as an opportunity to push for programs for school vouchers, potentially paid for by cutting funding for schools that are virtual. Once again, this is the last thing schools need to be facing in a tough economy.

- Raise teachers' pay by implementing a tobacco tax to discourage smoking and fund the raises.

The Governor may have promised a teacher pay raise, but that hit the cutting room floor as soon as the pandemic hit. Georgia has one of the lowest tobacco taxes in the nation, and tobacco taxes do reduce smoking. Paying teachers more by raising the tobacco tax to the regional or national average is a win-win.

- Allow Georgia residents in the DACA program to pay in-state tuition.

DACA students are effectively Georgians. They grew up here. Their parents pay taxes here. They pay taxes here. There's simply no reason to charge them extra tuition compared to other Georgia residents.

- Enact and actually fund a needs based HOPE scholarship to join the other 48 states and DC that have one.

Georgia passed legislation to create a needs based HOPE scholarship in 2018, but it was never implemented or funded.

Environment

- Require coal ash to be transferred to modern, lined landfills just like all other waste.

For decades, states have been requiring trash to go in landfills lined so that nothing seeps out of the landfill and pollutes the surrounding area or water. Georgia requires this for solid waste but not for coal ash. Coal ash contains heavy metals and radioactive materials, so it's imperative to require all coal ash to be put in lined landfills to prevent the spread of those pollutants.

- Create a shoreline protection commission to address the effect rising sea levels will have on coastal Georgia.

Climate change is already here. 2020 had the most named storms on record. Rising sea levels and rising storm surges will just increase. Erosion is already an issue on the Georgia coast, and rising sea levels will just exacerbate the problem. We need to study preemptive actions we can take to mitigate the harm to coastal communities.

- Ban single use plastics in state facilities like state parks and cafeterias near the Capitol.

Single use plastics are some of the worst pollutants and some of the easiest to avoid. The state government should take the lead and reduce packaging when possible and use recyclable and biodegradable materials instead.

- Properly regulate carcinogenic ethylene oxide omissions so people aren't exposed to it due to commercial use.

The Sterigenics facility in Cobb County is operating again, and it's back to releasing harmful ethylene oxide. While EO is necessary for certain sterilization processes, emitters need to be regulated to ensure the gas is being handled safely instead of vented into the community.

Facilities that vent ethylene oxide would be required to install air quality monitoring systems at the facility and report air quality every quarter. They would also be required to use a venting system approved by EPD.