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By Rusty Paul

The Georgia General Assembly Monday kicked off round two of the Covid-19 disrupted 2020 legislative session with a focus on the painful, difficult budget decisions that must be quickly made. This session clearly ranks among the strangest in Georgia history. It was suspended with the pandemic near its peak and restarts with the virus still active and protests raging about police-related deaths in Minneapolis and Atlanta.

While the Capitol technically remains open to the public, access to many traditionally open Capitol spaces is severely restricted to provide as much virus protection as possible.

For example, the number of members permitted on the Senate floor at any time will be limited. Senators are encouraged to follow floor and committee proceedings from their offices. Senators wishing to speak from the rostrum must queue up outside the chamber and maintain social distancing. The normal 60 second voting period is suspended to however long it takes for all Senators can reach the floor. During votes, one Senator at a time will be allowed in the chamber, so votes which normally take 60 seconds could be up to 20 minutes.

The House has similar restrictions. Rather than using the electronic voting systems, Representatives will do a verbal roll call, which will consume significant time as members come to the chamber and vote verbally.

These steps will profoundly limit the number of bills that can be voted on in the remaining 11 legislative days. Prior to the legislative suspension, the Senate became a hotbed of viral contagion, with several member contracting Covid-19 in a one-day session. So, these precautions are necessary to persuade some Senators to return.

Committee meetings are open, but hearing rooms are small. Since social distancing is required, the Senate is encouraging people to monitor hearings via the legislative streaming service rather than attend in person.

The Senate gallery is closed to the public and will become the press gallery. No Capitol rooms may be used for meetings by non-legislative groups, and the corridor outside the chamber will be closed to the public.

There will be no pages to summon Senators to meet lobbyists and constituents and no family members are allowed on the floor. Infrared cameras are installed to check body temperatures of all who enter and public entrances into the building have been reduced.

These restrictions, designed to protect members and the public, have an ancillary effect of forcing lobbyists and constituents to be more creative when it comes to legislative interaction. Rather than lobbying in person due to Covid concerns, groups are asked to submit policy papers to committees on their bills.

Because controversial bills tend to draw large numbers to the Capitol and consume debate time when debate is being discouraged, almost nothing controversial is expected to reach the floor. Monday morning, the Senate Rules Committee put two simple House bills on its floor calendar and that is likely the pace for the next 11 days.

Meanwhile, all of this will be occurring with daily, multiple-group protests targeting the Capitol, which will further complicate both legislative and public access to the Capitol.
Nevertheless, legislative activity will proceed, albeit at a much slower pace and the volume of bills considered will be dramatically fewer. It all starts with the budget, the only bill the legislature is constitutionally required to pass.

While tax revenues have not dropped as much as feared, the reductions significant enough to force legislators into hard decisions about what to cut and in this round, no programs will go untouched.

Federal CARES Act funds have helped soften the blow in a few programs, but key revenue sources like sales and transportation taxes have experienced precipitous declines in April and May. Through May, sales tax revenues in the Metro area, for instance, dropped around 14 percent, but in major centers like Fulton County, sales tax numbers are down 20 percent.

Transportation taxes have also been hit hard. The gas tax, which is a primary source of road construction and maintenance spending, was down 25 percent in May. However, transportation receives about five percent of the hotel/motel taxes, so overall transportation revenues were down over 29 percent.

Some healthcare and social services programs received CARES Act assistance, which allows tight state dollars to be shifted within departments. The Department of Community Health told appropriators this week it could reach its targeted cuts without reducing the rates it pays providers for services. That is good news for institutions like the William Bremen Home, though under normal conditions it could expect a modest increase in its rates.

However, conversations with legislative appropriators indicate most programs will endure some cuts and opportunities to increase slots in much needed disability and elder care programs will not occur. In fact, the goal is simply maintaining services for existing recipients wherever possible.

The legislature has 11 days to completely rewrite the budget that was moving through before the session was suspended.

**Business Liability Protections** – One bill with some controversy is a series of Senate bills to extend legal liability protections to business. Pushed by the Georgia Chamber, ABC and other business groups, the bill has been modified to extend protections to business reopening amid the Covid-19 pandemic. The Georgia Trial Lawyers Association says the bill is overly broad, but there is recognition that businesses face additional liability as they reemerge during a time when the virus is still active. This is one bill ABC will be tracking during the final phase of the session.