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## COLUMN

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## Howard: Week Five Under the Gold Dome

By: Sen. Jaha Howard (D-Smyrna)



We have wrapped up five weeks of legislative work under the Gold Dome, and are working hard to make quality healthcare, education and housing accessible and affordable for all.

For about five months during the interim, the Senate Special Committee on Eliminating Georgia's Income Tax met to discuss a Republican-led plan for income tax cuts. This week, our colleagues released their proposals as Senate Bills 476 and 477, aiming to implement their tax overhaul as the answer to the affordability crisis facing so many Georgians. It is true that lowering or eliminating the state income tax could save Georgia families some money during tax season. However, the lingering question of how our state will make up for more than \$15 billion in lost income tax revenue remains unanswered.

Senate Republicans propose cutting tax credits as one answer, but this does not account for the plan's long-term financial impacts. Tax credits have brought innumerable amounts of businesses, healthcare projects and infrastructure improvements to Georgia, so by cutting them out, any money saved by the tax cuts will be lost to these abandoned efforts. Georgia families are looking for answers as to why their hospital bills, power bills and grocery costs keep rising, but these bills will not bring that clarity.

This is why Senate Democrats introduced our answer this week: a legislative package that will put \$2 billion a year directly back into the pockets of Georgia families. We will do this by removing sales taxes on essential goods and creating refundable tax credits for families, homeowners and renters. If your property taxes and homeowners' insurance exceed 5% of your income, you would qualify for a refundable tax credit of up to \$2,500 a year. If you're a renter spending more than 33% of your income on rent, you qualify, too. Our families deserve stability, fairness, and a government that stands on your side, and our party is committed to just that.

We are also pushing for Medicaid expansion and additional funding for Georgia's rural hospitals through Senate Bills 380 and 170. Around 2 million people in Georgia rely on Medicaid for healthcare, but many have had to drop out of the program due to cuts to Affordable Care Act subsidies. SB 380 would address that lapse by authorizing the use of federal funds to cover the state's portion of the program, giving these Georgians a sense of relief that tax cuts alone would not. Additionally, SB 170 passed the Senate this week,

moving us one step closer to providing rural hospitals with the funding they need to remain operational during extreme weather events and other emergencies. Keeping everyone in our state safe and healthy is the foundation for addressing other economic hardships.

Senate Democrats are willing to debate with and support our colleagues across the aisle on certain legislative matters, but we will not condone policy designed solely as a distraction. Senate Republicans altered an otherwise bipartisan bill addressing the growing needs of physician assistants and registered nurses to instead ban gender-affirming care and puberty blockers for children and adults. This amendment is a poor excuse to distract from the discussion at hand, which should be figuring out how to best solve Georgia's affordability crisis. We want to expand Medicaid, remove data center tax exemptions, build affordable housing, improve public school funding and pay hardworking Georgians a living wage. The great people of our state, including our LGBTQ+ community, deserve our support and a state that they can afford to live in, and that is what these policies would accomplish.

Finally, I am proud to share that my legislation, Senate Bill 436, had its first hearing this week. This bill would pause the issuance of new tax exemptions for high-technology data center projects for one year, starting in July. If we want to continue bringing these campuses here, Georgians living in those communities deserve to know the impact on their water and power bills. Families deserve financial stability and the security of knowing their power bills will be stable, even as they juggle other costs.

Thank you for your input and support. I'm always grateful to serve you, and I hope you continue to reach out with any questions or concerns you may have going forward.

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*Sen. Jaha Howard represents the 35<sup>th</sup> Senate District, which includes portions of Cobb and Fulton counties. He may be reached by phone at (404) 657-2099 or by email at [Jaha.Howard@senate.ga.gov](mailto:Jaha.Howard@senate.ga.gov).*

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