



## **2021 ACCG Policy Agenda: Top Three Legislative Priorities**

### **1. Funding Broadband Deployment in Georgia**

ACCG recognizes the vital importance of expanding affordable, reliable and enhanced broadband access throughout Georgia. The association has worked with and commends the state for adopting several laws and policies in recent years to facilitate this development, particularly the 2018 creation of the “Georgia Broadband Deployment Initiative”. The model program provides for broadband expansion through state and local broadband planning policies, innovative and detailed mapping of unserved and underserved areas in the state, and coordinates federal and state grants/loans to fund broadband expansion.

ACCG asks the Georgia General Assembly to appropriate funds to the state grant program in order to help eligible local governments and their private sector partners provide broadband services to unserved and underserved areas. Furthermore, ACCG supports authorizing local development authorities to issue revenue bonds to fund broadband infrastructure.

### **2. Election Law Revisions**

ACCG commends the General Assembly for calling for, and funding, the replacement of Georgia’s dated voting equipment. ACCG encourages the state to continue working with, and providing funding to, counties to adequately train local election officials and the public on the use of the new technology; keep the equipment’s software, warranties and maintenance updated; and ensure machines’ replacement, when necessary.

Furthermore, Georgia counties have learned valuable lessons from having now implemented the state’s new voting system; conducting elections during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic; and the effects both have had on proper social distancing, securing adequate polling personnel and locations, effectively administering an expanded absentee ballot voting process, and conducting successful elections overall. Following the recommendations of an ACCG 2020 Elections Subcommittee, the association supports changes in state law to:

- Provide counties the flexibility to reduce the 1/250 ratio (voting machine per registered voter, per precinct) during non-general elections, recognizing that not every election is the same;
- Remove references to old direct-recording electronic voting equipment, which is no longer used;

- Sync up the federal and state deadlines for registering for Georgia's primary runoff election;
- Allow voters the option to provide a photocopy of their ID with their absentee ballot, as a backup, in order to prevent their absentee ballot from being rejected due to a signature mismatch;
- Allow persons to serve as poll workers outside of the county in which they live or are employed, so long as safeguards are incorporated to help ensure that this does not have the unintended consequence of draining other counties' recruitment pools;
- Revise the deadline by which counties must receive/accept absentee ballot applications in order to better ensure that voters' absentee ballots will be counted;
- Authorize counties to begin scanning absentee ballots on the third Monday prior to an election;
- Allow counties to have the option of employing absentee ballot drop boxes for future elections; and
- Authorize counties to establish vote centers on election day.

### **3. Increase Reimbursement for EMS Services**

There has not been an increase in reimbursement for EMS in recent history, however the responsibilities of the Ambulance Service have changed tremendously. Specifically, the following needs addressing:

- Change the mileage reimbursement to include all miles travelled. Currently the mileage reimbursement does not begin until the 11<sup>th</sup> mile.
- Correct all coding conflicts within the CMS and implement a process by which the manual is reviewed and corrected on an annual basis. Outdated information in the manual results in denial of claims.
- Increase maximum reimbursement for Treatment in Place to more adequately reflect the amount of time spent providing the service. Fears of the COVID-19 virus have resulted in a significant increase in calls from individuals who are afraid to go to the hospital, so they call EMS and refuse to be transported to the hospital. Providers are currently only reimbursed \$48.00 for each of those visits with no mileage reimbursement.
- Aid in acquiring additional PPE and disinfectant supplies to ensure protection for EMS staff.



## **2021 ACCG Policy Agenda: Objectives**

### **Authorize Public Hearings via Teleconference**

To properly address social distancing and other safeguards during the COVID-19 epidemic (an emergency situation) many counties successfully held public meetings by teleconference - as is authorized in the Open Meetings Act. However, counties remain uncertain of the legality of holding various public hearings by teleconference. The result has been that many public hearings, and attendant county actions, have been delayed indefinitely. ACCG first requests that the Georgia Attorney General (AG) provide an opinion as to whether holding public hearings via a teleconference is authorized by state law. Absent an AG opinion, or an opinion that this is not legal, ACCG asks the General Assembly to amend the Open Meetings Act to authorize counties to hold public hearings by teleconference during emergency situations, provided that the public is afforded the opportunity to participate and provide input at the hearing.

### **Business and Redevelopment Incentives**

Enhancing Georgia's competitive position in the global market is crucial to economic development in counties. ACCG supports targeted state incentives to promote business development and recruit companies to the state. ACCG supports extending the jobs tax credit program (or other state-led incentives) to disaster-impacted businesses that rebuild in counties declared a "Federally Declared Disaster Area" and supports flexibility in use of said incentives to businesses impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Redirection of Environmental Trust Fund Fees**

The Georgia General Assembly should appropriate fees and revenues collected for the Hazardous Waste Trust Fund (HWTF) and the Solid Waste Trust Fund (SWTF) for their statutorily intended use.

ACCG has long advocated for the General Assembly to dedicate statutorily-intended fees to the HWTF and the SWTF as these funds support such efforts as the clean-up of abandoned contaminated sites, leaking landfills, scrap tire piles and illegal dumps. Funds also go towards waste reduction and recycling programs. Regrettably, for the past 10 years, 63 percent of the HWTF fees and 69 percent of the SWTF fees have been redirected to the state's General Fund to be spent on other purposes.

Voter approval of a constitutional amendment on the November 2020 ballot would allow the Georgia General Assembly to establish, by statute, true and dedicated trust funds whereby fees collected for a specific purpose must go to that purpose rather than be redirected to the state's General fund. The approval of the constitutional amendment



would allow the General Assembly to take steps in the right direction to "put the trust in trust funds."

Should the Constitutional Amendment receive voter approval, ACCG urges the Georgia General Assembly to pass legislation to truly dedicate intended fees to the Hazardous Waste Trust Fund and the Solid Waste Trust Fund.

### **Authorize Judges to Conduct Certain Proceedings Via Video Conferencing**

There are extreme backlogs in all levels of court due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. New technologies and business processes will be critical for the judicial system to recover and perform more efficiently and safely. Allowing certain proceedings via videoconferencing will ensure access to justice; save valuable time and resources for sheriff's departments; and public defender offices and private counsel access to their clients without traveling to the Jail. Additionally, transporting offenders for production orders can place public safety and court officials at risk.

Legislation with clear guidance on conducting video conferencing for court hearings is critical to the judicial system and our correctional facilities and staff.

### **Public Notification of Tax Increase**

The tax increase notice required under the Taxpayer Bill of Rights has created great confusion about tax increases for the public. To promote public notification of tax increases, ACCG requests that the notification required by the Taxpayer Bill of Rights and the five-year history be replaced with one annual notification that is simple for the taxpayer to understand. Additionally, the General Assembly should consider exempting those local governments with "floating" homestead exemptions from compliance with these additional notification steps, in the same manner as the General Assembly has exempted the City of Atlanta.

### **Short Term Rentals**

The new "sharing economy" is significantly disrupting a number of industries, including the hotel/motel industry. It is not practical to rely on the private individuals renting out their extra space to register and collect hotel/motel taxes that are due on these rentals. Additionally, it is impractical to expect local governments to effectively track such rentals and enforce those payment obligations. To ensure the taxes due on such services are collected properly and efficiently, ACCG asks the General Assembly to require any business that provides an online or other platform providing short-term rentals to collect and remit hotel/motel taxes to the relevant local jurisdictions.



**Federal - Medicaid/Medicare/Federal Benefit Inmate Exclusion**

ACCG requests the federal government to allow Medicaid/Medicare coverage and other federal benefits for eligible inmates/detainees in local jails pre-adjudication and for hospital stays of more than 24 hours post adjudication. The inmate exception rule must be rescinded for those awaiting trial that have not been convicted. Those accused should not lose their Medicaid/Medicare/Federal benefits until the adjudication process is complete for those individuals in a pretrial status.

**Federal - Infrastructure Investment / Truck Weight Increases**

Counties play a critical role in our state's transportation system with local governments owning and maintaining 80 percent of all public roads in Georgia. ACCG encourages Congress to allocate funding for locally owned public infrastructure, which includes surface transportation projects, bridges, transit systems and airports and involve local governments in the decision-making process. In addition, ACCG urges Congress to refrain from passing legislation that increases allowable weight limits on local roads and bridges. Increasing the weight limits contributes to the rapid deterioration of local road and bridge infrastructure.

**Federal - Broadband/Telecommunications**

ACCG recognizes the critical importance of, and fully supports, expanding affordable broadband access throughout Georgia and stands ready to work with our federal, state and industry partners to facilitate this deployment. ACCG supports federal grant and loan programs in order to help eligible local governments and their private sector partners provide broadband services to unserved and underserved areas.

While accommodating broadband equipment in the public's right of way (ROW) may play a critical role in enhancing broadband connectivity, counties must maintain their ability to balance this access with their role of protecting the public health, safety and welfare and managing the taxpayer's ROW investment. Accordingly, ACCG opposes any federal legislation or rules which preempt or otherwise diminish counties' ability to regulate their community's ROW and land use.