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How to speak like a Georgia legislator

A legislative glossary for everyone



POLITICS

By James Salzer

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When you are listening to a legislator debate a bill and you're thinking, "*no entiendo*," you're not alone. Unless you're a legislator or a General Assembly staffer or a lobbyist, it can sound like another language.

In an effort to provide "a lil' hep" (see below), The Atlanta Journal-Constitution put together this handy dandy guide. Read it and you too will be speaking Legislatorish in no time.

A dinner, a lunch: A group meal sponsored by lobbyists who want you to pass/kill a bill they are interested in.

A good bill: Commonly used by lawmakers to start debate and let colleagues know they are not, in fact, offering a “bad bill” that will, say, destroy the environment, triple income taxes or reintroduce child labor. Example: “This is a good bill that provides a lil hep to the taxpayers and the children of Georgia.” See: A lil hep. See: For the children.

A lil hep: Usually employed when a legislator asks for more money for a local program or constituent. Sometimes also used to help an industry or group pay fewer taxes. As in, “Delta’s havin’ a rough time with these high fuel prices, we need to give ‘em a lil hep on their taxes.”

A simple bill: Usually said to indicate a bill aims to make a single change in state law or is so easy to understand even a legislator — or a journalist — can figure it out. As in, “This is a simple bill that does one thing and one thing only ...”

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Administration bill: A bill pushed by the governor.

Agency bill: A bill pushed by a state agency.

Amendment: A change made to a bill in committee, on the floor of one of the chambers or behind closed doors.

Appropriations: The committee that writes its chamber’s version of the budget. The House and Senate each have one, and they are considered very important since, you know, they decide how the state spends \$30 billion-plus a year.

Author: The author can be a legislator, legislative counsel, a lobbyist or special-interest association that wrote the bill. See: Sponsor.

Big budget: The budget for the upcoming fiscal year, which runs from July 1 through June 30. See: Physical year.

Big feed: Any one of the several sponsored events at the [Georgia Railroad Depot](#) during the [session](#), generally put on by cities or special-interest groups. There are fewer of them than there used to be. See: [Wild Hog Supper](#).

Explore Lobbyists spread the love on Valentine’s Day at the Capitol



Credit: Natrice Miller / Natrice.Miller@ajc.com

Called home: When a legislator “gets retired” on the “advice” of his family for having a little too much fun in Atlanta. Was heard more commonly 10-20 years ago, before the prevalence of social media.

Catfish: Another old-school term for a bill that gets gutted and deboned of any of its original substance. Formerly known as Grooverized, in honor of the late Rep. Denmark Groover, a Macon attorney who excelled at filleting bills. More commonly now, the person doing the gutting just refers to it as a “new version” of the bill. If drastic, it can also be called a “gut and replace bill.”

Cease all audible conversation: Presiding officer speak for “y’all shut the hell up now.”

Cleanup bill: A bill that either fixes something that’s fairly easily fixable — sometimes just a word or two, or even a comma, in a law — or fixes something that was messed up in a bill that passed the previous session.

Communities/Community of interest: Can mean a lot of things, but generally it’s used in redistricting as a reason to not split up rural counties or small towns when lawmakers draw political boundaries because those folk have “common” interests. It does not apply at the Capitol to cities and metropolitan areas such as Atlanta, which generally aren’t considered to have “communities of interest.”

Conference committee: A committee of three House members and three senators, appointed by the House speaker and the lieutenant governor, to reconcile versions of a bill passed by both chambers.

Constitutional amendment: A proposal — filed as a resolution — to change the state constitution. It needs two-thirds support in both chambers to make the electoral ballot.

Christmas tree: A bill that gets lots of other bills amended to it, generally at the end of the session. Common with tax-break legislation. See: Vehicle. See: Frankenbill

Creates jobs: Similar to “for the children.” Anything that “creates jobs” is considered the gold standard legislatively, even if the only people telling you that are the lobbyists asking for an industry tax break.

Crossover: The day after which, hypothetically, bills are dead for the session if they haven’t passed either chamber. No bill is really dead until the session ends. And even then not always.

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From First Day to Sine Die: Key dates and things to know about the 2024 Georgia Legislature

Dead: Describes a bill that is no longer viable, at least for the moment. Such legislation can be miraculously resuscitated, often by being hung on a Christmas tree/Frankenbill/vehicle. (see above/below)

Devotional: The sermons that start each business day, usually from a Protestant preacher with a lot on his/her mind. Typically they ask lawmakers to act more like Jesus. Lawmakers also have prayers before committee meetings in case they didn’t get the message during the devotional.



Credit: Natrice Miller/AJC

Doctor of the day: Local doctors who volunteer to work a day at the Statehouse medical station.

Engross: When lawmakers vote to try to keep anyone from messing with a bill. Used to be rare. Now common.

Everybody agrees: This is what lawmakers say when they have a bill that lobbyists are fighting over. The lobbyists “make suggestions” for changes. “Everybody agrees” means lobbyists/advocacy groups on the two sides of an issue accept the final compromise. Note: It doesn’t mean “everybody,” as in all 11 million Georgians, agree with the final product. It is a way of signifying that lobbyists have decided, “Meh, I’m OK with that.” See: Friends in the hall.

For the children: Formerly, “fer the chil’ren” but pronunciation has improved. Children = Georgians under the age of consent. As in, “We need to do this for the children.” Stating a bill will help children is usually a winning strategy in the Legislature. Commonly used on education bills.

Fiscal note: Estimate of a bill’s cost. Sometimes mispronounced “physical note.” Legislators are supposed to get to see fiscal notes before they vote on legislation that costs the state money, but they often don’t.

Fiscal year: The year covered by the state’s budget, July 1 to June 30. See: “physical year.”

Friends across the hall: The Senate, if said by a member of the House, the House, if said by a member of the Senate. Sometimes said in sarcastic terms, as in, “Our friends across the hall seem to be taking the day off while we’re here doing the people’s business.”

Friends in the hall: Also known as “people in the hall” or “folks in the hall.” Lobbyists. Example: “Our friends in the hall support this bill.” Possibly because they helped write it.

Gallery: Fourth-floor balconies where members of the public can watch the goings on.

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Gentleman from, lady from: How lawmakers refer to one another in debates. As in, “The gentleman/lady from Gwinnett County (or any county) knows of what he/she speaks.” Which isn’t always true, but sometimes it is.

Hand vote: Allows lawmakers to vote on bills without a record of how they voted (the number of hands are “counted,” not whose hand is raised).

Housekeeping bill: A bill that fixes small or technical problems in law. Occasionally bigger changes are slipped in when nobody is looking. See: Vehicle. See: Cleanup bill.

I know the senator has great passion for which he/she speaks: A throwaway line Senate and House leaders have used instead of responding to a question, sometimes because the question is really a statement and sometimes questionable. It is a version of the always versatile Southern comeback, “Bless his/her heart.” See: Init not true.

Industry bill: A bill brought by lawmakers on behalf of a particular industry, often written by lobbyists for that industry. It often carries more weight when a lawmaker announces an industry wants X bill passed.

Init not true: Georgia version of the double negative “isn’t it not true,” used in the form of a question. Example: “Init not true that this bill will hep the taxpayers and children this physical year?”

Explore Breaking it down: What exactly does the Georgia General Assembly do?



Credit: Jason Getz/AJC

Leadership: The House speaker, Senate president and the leadership team of the majority party who make the big decisions. Historically mostly from rural Georgia.

Local bill: Nonstatewide legislation affecting a locality.

Local control: It’s an often-stated premise that counties and cities should have control over their governments without interference from the General Assembly. Often ignored if the General Assembly doesn’t like the way cities and counties are governing themselves.

Little budget: The midyear spending plan for the final few months of the current fiscal year.

Morning orders/afternoon orders/Points of Personal Privilege: Essentially when lawmakers get up to say what's on their mind. It can be everything from wishing somebody happy birthday or celebrating the anniversary of their fraternity or sorority to war in the Middle East and the price of gas.

New information: It is often used as budget speak to support spending or cutting spending. As in "we've got new information that shows schools don't really need new textbooks." Used to be called "later data."

Not ready: As in, "That bill is not quite ready." It usually means the bill is being held up, often as a hostage to be used in a later trade for passage of other legislation. Or it will never be ready and never pass.

Parliamentary inquiry: Means "Yo, I got a question over here!" Also can be the prelude to a statement "of fact" stated in the form of a question. See: Init not true.

Physical year: What some rural Georgians call the "fiscal year," which runs from July 1 to June 30. Not to be confused with the actual calendar year, which runs from Jan. 1 through Dec. 31.

PORK: Or Project of Regional Concern (PORC). A project slipped into the budget to help one area or legislator. Budgets are not as porky as they used to be, but PORK is usually something to help lawmakers with their reelection campaigns.

Recognition: When local lawmakers parade in their local football team, checkers champion or rattlesnake roundup queen before the House or Senate. Or it could be a politician, civic leaders, a recording artist, etc.

Reconsideration: When a bill or amendment is brought up for another vote.

Recommit: To send a bill back to a committee. Often because it's "not ready."

Reform: Changing pretty much anything is a "reform," even if it doesn't really make the situation better. Most typically used on tax or education bills. Cutting taxes for a favorite industry or individuals with lots of lobbyists (see: friends in the hall) is "tax reform." The annual bills to change how students are taught or schools are funded or teachers are paid are called "education reform."

Rules: The committee that decides whether a bill will be debated by the full chamber. Later in the session, it sets the daily calendar. Like appropriations committees, it's a big deal.

Sine die: Latin for adjournment without recall. On the last day of the session, the House speaker and lieutenant governor adjourn "sine die" and slam down their gavels.



Credit: Arvin Temkar/AJC

Sponsor: Legislator who files a bill and generally promotes it through the legislative process. If a House member files a bill and gets it passed through the House, the Senate “sponsor” is the senator who presents it to that chamber. And vice versa.

Study committee: Where bills often go when lawmakers “aren’t ready” to act on them. Sometimes the bills are refined by the study committee and will come up the next year. Sometimes they disappear. Sometimes such committees are set up to spend the summer/fall promoting an agenda. See: Not ready.

Sunset: When a law or agency expires. Usually legislation or an agency about to sunset gets renewed by legislative action.

Supplemental budget: See: Little budget.

Taxpayers’ money: It is what lawmakers say whenever they pass a tax cut to remind fellow lawmakers (as if they need reminding) where the money they are spending comes from. “As in, we need to let taxpayers keep more of their hard-earned money in their wallets.” (Hat tip: Gov. Brian Kemp). Used less frequently when lawmakers do something that will cost taxpayers more money.

That’s for each and every member to decide for him or herself: What House speaker/Senate president/sponsors of legislation say when they don’t want to answer a question or when the person asking the question is making a statement about a bill, rather than really asking a question. See: In it not true.

Unfunded mandate: When the federal government tells the state what to do and the state has to at least partially pay for it. Similar to when the state Legislature tells cities and counties what to do and the cities and counties have to pay for it.

Unlock the machines: What the chamber leader says before members vote on a bill. The “unlocking” allows members to have their vote registered. See: Vote on the board.

Vehicle: A piece of harmless legislation used by lawmakers to carry another measure they really want to pass. The bill they want to pass gets amended onto the vehicle. See: Christmas tree.

Vote on the board: When members vote on an issue and it shows up on the House or Senate electronic board.

Well: The front of the House and Senate chambers where lawmakers speak on bills or amendments.

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About the Author



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James Salzer has covered state government and politics in Georgia since 1990. He previously covered politics and government in Texas and Florida. He specializes in government finance, budgets, taxes, campaign finance, ethics and legislative history

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