

Government spending spree continues

If you're wary of Congress pulling out its credit card one more time, the news this past week was mostly bad. Not all bad, but mostly.

Washington is focused on "phase four" of emergency funding tied to the pandemic. Democrats who control the U.S. House have proposed \$3 trillion more. Senate Republicans appear to be working on a bill that costs "only" \$1 trillion, which means that's the floor as negotiations continue. The ultimate figure will likely land somewhere in between.

At the risk of numbing your mind – and making this seem like Monopoly money – some context is in order.

Before the pandemic, federal spending in the 2020 budget year was forecast to be about \$4.8 trillion. That would have set a record, even when adjusting past figures for inflation. The deficit was to surpass \$1 trillion, and that was when everyone thought we had a strong economy that couldn't be derailed.

In recent months, Congress has already spent \$2.4 trillion in emergency funding. That's equal to half of an entire year of running the whole federal government: Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, various welfare programs, the military, veterans' programs, new infrastructure – all of it.



Guest Editorial
Kyle Wingfield

Now we are talking about perhaps doubling that relief spending, which in turn could mean doubling all federal spending in one year. The deficit? There's no telling how many trillions that will be, considering the way tax revenues have also been hit.

And there's reason to think all of this spending is making matters worse in some ways. One point of contention is how much more than usual to pay the unemployed. Not whether to pay more than usual, but how much more.

Many business owners have lamented their inability to bring back laid-off employees who make more money with enhanced jobless benefits than if they went back to work. Those enhanced benefits are set to expire at the end of July, but there seems to be little appetite for returning to normal unemployment benefits. It's just a matter of how enhanced they remain.

If you've made it through this many depressing words, I feel I owe you a ray of hope. Here's one.

As I've mentioned in the past, one shortsighted aspect of the largest relief bill to date, the CARES Act, is that it handcuffed state and local governments' ability to spend funds allocated to them as they see fit. They were only allowed to spend the money on expenses related to the pandemic, but the bill's appropriations far surpassed those expenses.

The Senate Republicans' "phase four" plan reportedly includes much greater flexibility for state and local governments to use that money, including to replace revenue lost because of the recession caused by the pandemic.

More flexibility is good news. What's the value of that flexibility? Let's go through a few more very large numbers.

In Georgia, the Kemp administration reports spending about \$880 million to fight the Coronavirus through June 30, which was the end of the last budget year. About 40% of that was to go to local governments for their costs.

Yet, the CARES Act alone devoted some \$4.1 billion to our state government, about \$600 million of which was to be passed on to the very largest local governments. That's on top of hundreds of millions more for k-12 schools, colleges and universities, hospitals, transit agencies and other emergency-fund recipients.

It's not clear the entire difference between that \$4.1 billion from the CARES Act and the \$880 million already spent (which comes out to about \$3.2 billion) is now available for whatever use Gov. Brian Kemp and the General Assembly want. There will surely be more pandemic-related expenses. Still, it's quite possible we could see a great many of those newly flexible funds made available to offset some of the \$2.2 billion legislators cut from the state budget for the year that began July 1.

That flexibility would be worth a lot, enough that Congress could slow down the spending spree – for a while, at least.

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Local districts have authority to chart their course for upcoming school year. Our role is to support them.

School leaders, teachers, parents, students, families – and state leaders – have been making tough decisions since the onset of COVID-19 in our schools in March. I have stood with our schools since the first cases in the Fulton County School System.

Governor Brian Kemp stood with our schools when he made the call to close schools across our state last Spring. The Governor has been consistent in his commitment to public education – laser-focused on fully funding the education formula and providing our educators a much-deserved pay raise.

As a pandemic crashed into our state's economy, the Governor made tough decisions that blunted the destructive blow to education funding and preserved progress on teacher pay raises. As a 28-year public-school educator myself, I want you to know he has been a true partner of mine in supporting public education and doing what's best for students and educators.

With a new school year beginning, public education experts are again being called to make public health decisions.

The same people – school leaders, teachers, parents, students, families, and state leaders – are making tough decisions once again. These groups of Georgians all agree that the ideal educational environment for our children is in the classroom. Trust me, as a vet-

eran educator myself, I know teachers want to get back into their classrooms, too. But I also know safety must be at the forefront.

Most of our school districts, in talking with their families, staff, communities, and evaluating public health data, are currently planning an in-person start to their school year. They are offering combinations of virtual options, hybrid models, or full in-person instruction.

Other districts, particularly those in our metro areas, where there are high population concentrations and high COVID-19 case counts, have decided to go with full online learning with a planned phase-in to in-person instruction.

The role of the Georgia Department of Education is to support the course of action decided upon by local school districts, so that we can work together to ensure a successful outcome for students.

Whatever the start of school looks like, no one can guarantee a start without hiccups or challenges, but I can guarantee we will do everything possible to ensure our students are safe and learning.

The community needs and public health data look very different from one area of the state to another. Macon, the city, is very different from Macon County. Decatur, the city, is very different from Decatur County. We must recognize that, honor that, and continue to let local communities and school districts make local decisions -- that's how we will build trust and how

we will get back to school safely.

It is critical that school districts establish an ongoing dialogue with their communities, students, families, and staff. Engaging them in restart efforts at the beginning and throughout the upcoming school year is key so they have buy-in and faith in this unique educational experience.

Let me be very clear: school districts and communities will continue to have my full support and commitment in the path they select. Whatever a school district's decision, our issued guidance supports that model.

We are distributing face coverings, no-touch thermometers, hand sanitizing stations, and other supplies to all our schools so they are better prepared. We are also seeking a federal testing waiver so students and teachers can focus on what truly matters – health, safety, and learning.

Despite headlines that seek to pit state leaders against school leaders, the Governor and I have a proven record of working together alongside our educators and school leaders.

We will continue to be there alongside our school leaders and provide as much service and support as possible – every step of the way. We stood with our schools and educators in March when the virus started hitting our schools and we will continue to stand with them as they start the new school year, and throughout.

No doubt, there are many tough decisions still ahead, but we will get through them – together.

But one choice is clear – the health and safety of students and school staff, the true heroes of this on-going crisis, must remain paramount. We will continue to choose compassion over compliance.



An open letter from Georgia State School Superintendent Richard Woods

When you assume, you make an . . .

"Excuse me, coach, can I have a word with you?"

I was getting in my car, about to leave the recreation park after coaching a 9-10-year-old football game a few years ago, when the cordial young lady asked to speak to me. By her pleasant tone, I thought she was going to congratulate us on our impressive victory, or me for my coaching performance, or me, for wearing socks that matched.

She wasn't. "Sure, what can I do for you?"

"Well, one of your players told my son he was going to kill him," she said, suddenly unpleasant, head bobbing side to side, hands on hips – what I now know as the "Karen" posture. "Yeah, that's right. He said he was going to kill him. What kind of sportsmanship are you teaching your kids? This is kids playing football. What kind of . . ."

I held up my hand. "Wait, ma'am, are you sure about this? What player said what, and when?"

"Your number 5, the smallest player on your team, told my son he was going to kill him during the game. What kind of person are you, teaching that kind



Len's Lines
Len Robbins

of sportsmanship? And, another thing . . ."

I had to interrupt. The smallest kid on our team, my son, who was #2, was in the backseat of my car, as was our #5, and they are two different people. They had heard everything she said, as had everyone in the parking lot.

"Hold on, ma'am, I have #5 in the back seat of my car, and our smallest player as well," I said, looking into the backseat. "Guys, be honest, did either of you say anything close to what she said to her son before, during, or after the game?"

Our #5 was a soft-spoken, well-mannered kid. I knew he would never do such a

thing. On the other hand, my children are guilty until proven innocent.

"No, sir," said #5 and my son in unison, with my son adding: "I've never seen that kid before in my life."

I can tell when my son is not telling the truth. His eyes dart from side to side. His eyes were sure and steady.

"Daddy, nobody on our team said anything like that to that boy. Look at his jersey, and I think . . ."

"Hold on, that's all I need to hear," I said, giving him the halt sign.

"Ma'am, is it possible there's been a mistake, that . . ."

"No, your #5 told my son he was going to kill him," she said. "What kind of sportsmanship are you teaching? I know you're from Homer-ville and you think your (curse word) doesn't stink, but . . ."

"Whoa, now, let's not cuss in front of kids," I said, which prompted her to utter some more profanity, at which I offered a silent wave and closed my door.

I then quickly, but safely, put my car in gear to exit the parking lot. On the way home, perplexed by the experience, I offered some follow-up questions to the

boys in the back.

"Hey, guys, do you remember anyone on our team saying anything to anyone on the other team. You know, that was mean or a threat or anything like that?"

"No," my son answered matter-of-factly. "But that boy wasn't on the other team."

"Huh?" "That boy had on a blue uniform," he said. "We played a red team tonight. The blue team played in one of those other games."

"Wait, I thought that woman said her son played against us?"

"The cussing woman's son was standing next to her, daddy. He was wearing a blue jersey."

I hadn't looked at the boy. My view was blocked by the woman getting in my face. Karen had cussed out the wrong coach.

"So, she didn't even notice that I wasn't the coach of the team her son played? Geez," I said aloud, shaking my head.

"And you didn't even notice her son was wearing a blue jersey," my son added. "I tried to tell you."

When you assume, when you assume.

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Unsigned letters, letters signed with a fictitious signature, copies of letters sent to public officials, or letters containing unverified or anonymous quotes will not be accepted.

We limit letters on a subject when we feel it has been thoroughly aired to the point of letters becoming repetitive. Also rejected are letters that are libelous, in bad taste, or are personal attacks on individuals or private businesses.

Writers must include addresses and telephone numbers. These are for identification purposes only, and will not be published.

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