

# General Assembly kicks off 2021 session

## Voting laws, criminal justice reform highlight 2021 General Assembly agenda

Legislative leaders are promising to tackle two issues that dominated the news in Georgia and across the nation when the 2021 General Assembly session opened on Monday.

Weeks of protests and legal challenges sparked by President-elect Joe Biden's razor-thin victory over President Donald Trump in Georgia and other battleground states have prompted a call for changes to voting laws in Georgia, including restrictions on mail-in voting.

Street demonstrations across America following the death of George Floyd, a black man, after a police officer kneeled on his neck for nearly nine minutes in Minneapolis, and the shooting death of another black man, Ahmaud Arbery, by white vigilantes in Georgia provided momentum for state lawmakers to pass a hate-crimes bill last June and pledge to follow up with more criminal-justice reforms this year.

The General Assembly also will fulfill the annual legal requirement of passing a balanced state budget, buoyed by healthier-than-expected state revenues but hampered by demands from state agencies to restore at least some of the spending cuts the legislature imposed last year.

And lawmakers will renew what has become an annual debate over whether to legalize gambling in Georgia in various forms, from online sports betting and pari-mutuel betting on horse racing to casinos.

Proposals to change Georgia's election laws will take center stage under the Gold Dome as lawmakers from both parties grapple with changing voter patterns that saw the 2020 presidential election and both of the state's U.S. Senate seats flip in Democrats' favor.

Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger is calling for tightening state voter ID laws for mail-in ballots and eliminating no-excuse absentee voting, which since 2005 has allowed Georgians to request absentee ballots for any reason, not just because they live out of state or are physically impaired.

The June 9 primaries, Nov. 3 general election and Jan. 5 Senate runoffs each saw more than one million absentee ballots cast, shattering previous mail-in voting records.

Raffensperger traced slow turnaround times that sparked suspicions over Georgia's election integrity to the flood of absentee ballots.

"It makes no sense when we have three weeks of in-person early voting available," Raffensperger told state lawmakers last month. "It opens the door to potential illegal voting."

House Speaker David Ralston said another priority will be getting rid of the "jungle primary" law in Georgia, which set the stage for the huge field of 21 candidates in November's special election for the Senate seat held by Republican Kelly Loeffler.

It opened the door for former U.S. Rep. Doug Collins, R-Gainesville, to split the GOP vote with Loeffler, forcing last week's runoff that resulted in Loeffler's loss to Democrat Raphael Warnock.

"I don't know who could be in favor of a jungle primary anymore," said Ralston, R-Blue Ridge.

Ralston said he also expects the General Assembly to consider repealing Georgia's citizen's arrest law, which has been invoked by the defendants in the Arbery case, as a follow-up to last year's hate crimes measure.

Rep. Carl Gilliard, D-Garden City, prefled a bill last month to do just that. He said the citizen's arrest law dates back to the 19th century and is out of date.

"The average person can pick up a phone, dial 911 and have the professionals handle it," Gilliard said.

Gilliard said the Arbery case and last Summer's Black Lives Matter protests will put momentum behind repealing the citizen's arrest law.

"This has been a year where people all over the world sounded an alarm," he said. "We've got to listen to the voice and the will of the people."

Legislative budget writers enter the 2021 General Assembly session more optimistic than might have been expected in the midst of a pandemic-driven economic slowdown that has forced thousands of businesses to close and put several million Georgians on unemployment. State tax revenues have been coming in at a healthy pace in recent months.

With Democrats taking over the White House and both houses of Congress, the state can expect more federal aid than would have been likely otherwise, said Danny Kanso, tax and budget policy analyst for the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute. Congressional Republicans dug in their heels last Fall against putting more COVID-19 relief toward state and local government affected by the pandemic.

"The odds of getting significant aid to state and local governments is increasing substantially," Kanso said.

But Georgia Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Blake Tillery noted the 2021 session is starting with the state in a financial hole, since the General Assembly was forced to cut agency spending by \$2.2 billion last year.

"We're doing better than we thought we would, but I don't think we'll be in a position to add that \$2.2 billion back," said Tillery, R-Vidalia.

Ralston said legislative Republicans have yet to fulfill a commitment to voters to follow through with the second installment of a state income tax cut and a 2% teacher pay raise.

"People need their money," he said. "They need to keep more of their money."

Gov. Brian Kemp said raising teacher pay remains a priority but will be a tough sell during this session because of the economic impacts of COVID-19.

"We still want to do the pay raise," he said. "It's just exactly when we can get to that, I think it's a little early to commit as to when. ... If we have revenues, we've got to make sure that we restore funding to our schools."

While lawmakers face no legal obligation to address the legalized gambling issue every year as they do with the budget, it has become a perennial subject of debate under the Gold

Dome.

A proposal to legalize online sports betting has the best chance of passing this year for two reasons. Supporters say it will not require a constitutional change because it can be accomplished by adding it to the current state law governing the Georgia Lottery program.

Sports betting also is being backed by a coalition of Atlanta's four pro sports teams: the Braves, Falcons, Hawks and Atlanta United.

Billy Linville, spokesman for the Georgia Professional Sports Alliance, said the industry has been hit hard by the Coronavirus

pandemic and needs the boost sports betting would give to fan interest.

"Our professional sports teams in Georgia generate billions of dollars for our state and thousands of jobs," he said. "[The teams] have to enhance their engagement with fans or they'll go elsewhere."

Backers of casinos and pari-mutuel betting on horse racing also will back pushing those measures. But since they would require a constitutional amendment putting them on the statewide ballot for Georgia voters to decide, they face longer odds.

## 4-H Shotgun Team organizational meeting set for January 19th



The Seminole County 4-H Shotgun Team will be having an organizational and educational meeting for 2021 Shotgun team on Tuesday, January 19. This event is for seventh through twelfth grade 4-H members.

This meeting is for modified trap and skeet and trap. All 4-H'ers and parents who are interested need to attend this organizational meeting beginning at 6:00 p.m. on January 19 at the Seminole County Ag Center on Town and Country Road in Donalsonville.

This is the first meeting for the 2021 team and it is a required meeting. All interested in being a member of the Shotgun Team must be enrolled in 4-H, and members must have a parent or guardian attend this meeting. No money or forms will be collected at this first meeting.

For questions or additional information call 229-524-2326. Attendees must sign up to attend this meeting, and due to COVID-19, the meeting may be postponed or held virtually depending on guidance from UGA, CDC, etc.

Pictured at left are Trace Ogletree and Steve Whitaker



## Seminole County Recreation Department Soccer Team of the week

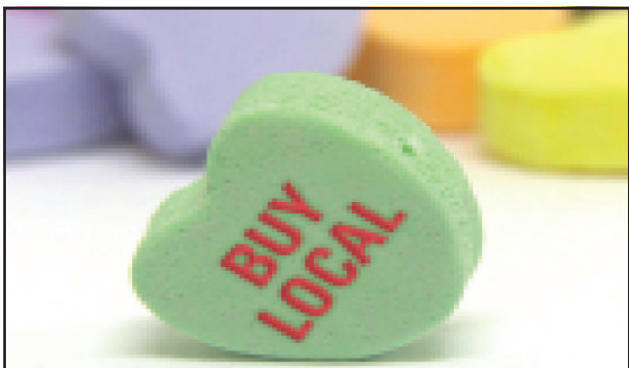
The Seminole County Recreation Department soccer team of the week members are Owen Phagen, Hayes Waddell, Emmett Payne, Bowen Lane, Ausben Hicks, and Ashton Culverson. Ashley Shingler is their coach.



Aspen Thompson, Kade Touchton and Meg Mathis

## Locals exhibit well at Winter Pig Classic

Seminole County Hog exhibitors Aspen Thompson, Kade Touchton and Meg Mathis participated this past weekend at the Winter Pig Classic in Perry, Georgia. They all three did a great job showing their pigs in showmanship and in weight classes. Meg Mathis placed third, fourth and fifth place with her three pigs in the prospect show.






31 shopping days until Valentine's Day

GIVING BEGINS WITH ME.

DONATE

BLOOD




Tuesday, February 2, 2021

10:00 AM - 4:00 PM

Donalsonville Hospital


All donors will receive a FREE \$10 eGift Card, a FREE OneBlood Long-Sleeve T-Shirt and a wellness checkup including a COVID-19 antibody test!

Appointments are encouraged, please visit [www.oneblood.org/donate-now](http://www.oneblood.org/donate-now) and use sponsor code #17625



LIMITED TIME: DONATING TWICE IS EXTRA NICE!


The challenge is on for whole blood donors! OneBlood has partnered with Carrabba's Italian Grill® to offer all donors who give two times between January and April a \$25 Carrabba's eGift Card as a thank you! <http://givelife.io/twice>



ID required. Donors must be at least 16 years old. Those who are 16 years old need parental permission. See website for more details. \*One offer per donor, per donation. No cash value. Not transferable. If you have recently donated, thank you. Please visit us when you are eligible to donate again. Not responsible for lost or stolen gift card. Donor must have successful donation to obtain results. If donor does not have account created in donor portal already, they must provide email address to phlebotomist at the time of registration so account can be created. Donor will receive email post donation with instructions. The same email provided at registration is used to activate donor portal account. Do not present to donate if you have a fever. You must wait at least 14 days before donating if you have been exposed to someone who has or may have COVID-19, have recently been tested and are pending test results for COVID-19 or if you have a confirmed active case of COVID-19.

[oneblood.org](http://oneblood.org) 1-888-9-DONATE

ID REQUIRED

 Share your power.