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Housing, ADUs and Local Zoning Authority

Question:

As Georgia continues to grow, state policymakers have considered ways to increase housing supply, including policies affecting accessory dwelling units (ADUs) and local zoning.

What role, if any, should the General Assembly play in local land-use and zoning decisions, including ADUs, and how should the state balance housing needs with local control and the interests of established neighborhoods?

Sonya Halpern's Response:

Georgia needs more housing choices at more price points, and the state has a role in helping make that possible. But I do not believe the answer is for the General Assembly to routinely substitute its judgment for that of local governments on land-use decisions.

There are things the state can and should do—invest in infrastructure, create incentives, expand financing options and remove unnecessary barriers. Zoning, however, is inherently local. Cities and counties know their neighborhoods, their infrastructure and their plans for growth in ways the state simply cannot.

ADUs are a good example. They can add housing options, allow older adults to remain near family and give homeowners another source of income. Atlanta's City Council has spent considerable time determining where ADUs are appropriate and establishing rules for how they fit within different neighborhoods. I don't think the state should come in behind that work with a one-size-fits-all mandate.

Increasing Georgia's housing supply while still respecting the work communities/municipalities have done to plan for their growth do not have to be competing goals.

Public Safety and the Criminal Justice System

Question:

Public safety depends on law enforcement as well as an effective judicial and corrections system.

What changes, if any, should the General Assembly make to improve the enforcement of Georgia's criminal laws and the effectiveness of the state's courts, prosecution, corrections, and public-safety systems?

Sonya Halpern's Response:

Public safety depends on more than law enforcement. It depends on the entire criminal justice system working—from the officer making an arrest to prosecutors and public defenders, the courts, corrections and ultimately reentry.

I've seen those connections up close through my work on the Senate Public Safety Committee and, particularly, the subcommittee examining conditions at the Fulton County Jail. We heard from judges, prosecutors, public defenders, the sheriff and others across the system. A backlog in the courts affects the jail. Staffing shortages affect safety. A lack of coordination between agencies slows everything down. Fixing one part of the system without paying attention to the others only gets you so far.

The General Assembly should focus on making the whole system work better. That means addressing court backlogs, making sure prosecutors and public defenders have the resources to do their jobs, recruiting and retaining well-trained law enforcement officers, improving coordination among agencies and holding our corrections system accountable.

I don't see support for law enforcement and criminal justice reform as competing ideas. We can expect officers to be well trained and supported while also demanding professionalism and accountability. That is one reason I consistently supported Atlanta's Public Safety Training Center. If we have high expectations of our first responders, we have to invest in the training that helps them meet those expectations.

Public safety is one of government's most basic responsibilities. People should be safe in their homes and communities and have confidence that the system responsible for keeping them safe works.

Education and Local Control

Question:

Recent legislation addressing student cell phone use in public schools is one example of the General Assembly setting statewide policy on an issue that also affects the day-to-day operation of local schools.

What role should the state play in setting education policy, and which decisions do you believe are best left to local school districts and boards of education?

Sonya Halpern's Response:

Serving on the Senate Education & Youth Committee, I think about this question a lot. There are some things we should expect for every child in Georgia, no matter where they go to school. Children should be reading on grade level, schools should be safe, and we should have high academic standards, strong teachers and real accountability when students are not getting what they need.

The state also has a responsibility to adequately fund those expectations. We can't tell school districts what they must accomplish and then fail to give them the resources to do it.

But not every decision belongs at the Capitol. Georgia has 181 school districts, and what works in a large metro district may not make sense in a small rural one.

Cell phones are a good example of where statewide action made sense. The distraction they created in classrooms wasn't unique to one district. We set a statewide expectation while giving districts flexibility in how to implement it.

Literacy is another example, but in a different way. Too many of our children are not reading on grade level, and leaving the approach entirely to individual districts has not gotten us where we need to be. So the state stepped in over the last few years with a more consistent approach to teaching reading and backed it with resources, including making an investment in literacy coaches for every K–5 public school.

We can and should be consistent about what we expect for Georgia's students without assuming every school district always has to get there the same way.