

HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS FEBRUARY 27, 2017 7:19 PM

# Proposed legislation could change the future of high school sports in Georgia



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All of a sudden, administrating the state basketball tournament is not in the forefront of the focus for the GHSA.

With a bill pending in the state legislature that would all but eliminate the GHSA for another association to govern high school athletics in the state, the GHSA's board of trustees voted 5-3 at a special meeting Monday to ask executive director Gary Phillips to resign, and a special executive committee meeting has been schedule for 10 a.m. on Monday at the Thomaston-Upson Civic Center, where the full committee of more than 60 people will vote for or against the board of trustees' recommendation.

Phillips, who is under contract until 2018, is declining comment until after Monday's meeting.

The GHSA is facing a pair of bills to form a new association. Senate Bill 203 is authored by Bartow County's Bruce Thompson and backed by 16 other senators, including John F. Kennedy of Macon. House Bill 415 has six sponsors, led by John Meadows of Calhoun.

The House Education Committee right after lunch on Monday heard Meadows of Calhoun, one of the primary authors, discuss the need for a new association. Several times, he mentioned the "internal problems" of the association, "real or perceived", and wanted a passage to push the bill to the rules committee.

Meadows said he's looking for "progress" from the GHSA by Friday. As chairman of the House Rules Committee, his House Rules Committee can decide to send the bill to the full House, and a step closer to becoming law. Or he could decide not to send it to the House. For this year, anyway.

"If progress is being made, I'll sit on it," he said. "But y'all do know what happens to bills in the first year, right? They stay alive until next year."

As of late Monday afternoon, there was no scheduled hearing on the Senate's version of the bill.

Jay Russell, son of state football coaching legend Erk Russell and an assistant executive director with the GHSA, spoke to the committee. About 15 minutes into the 18-minute discussion, Russell delivered news Meadows was apparently interested in hearing.

“By the way, chairman Meadows, the board of trustees did meet (Monday) morning, and Mr. Phillips has decided to retire at the end of this school year. So we will be looking for a new exec director,” Russell said. “I don’t know if that will influence the vote at all, but I wanted you to have that as information.”

Russell’s statement came, sources said, based on a conversation with Phillips before Russell left for Atlanta and the hearing. The board of trustees meeting continued into the afternoon with more discussion before the vote. After Russell’s disclosure, Meadows then offered some praise for Phillips.

“I don’t want anybody being misunderstood,” he said. “Gary Phillips has done what he’s thought was best for this organization since he got there. He was Mr. (Ralph) Swearngin’s hand-picked (successor), and he’s done what he’s thought was in the best interest of this organization since he’s been there.

“And I guess that he’s doing this because he thinks it might be in the best interest of this organization. so don’t ... throw any rocks at him.”

Chairman Brooks Coleman then called for a vote. There was only one “no” vote.

“Mr. Chairman, it goes to rules, and it’s up to you to get it out of rules,” Coleman said to some laughter.

“I can probably do ...” Meadows replied.

“I know someone you can talk with,” Coleman said.

Meadows is the chairman of the House Rules Committee and basically decides the fate of whether the bill gets a full House floor vote or perhaps sits for a year with no action this session. Friday is a key day.

The GHSA board’s vote is a recommendation, so if the executive committee votes to keep Phillips, that would indicate that the GHSA may be gearing up to battle the bill, which is based in part on a similar bill in Florida and contains a variety of controversial aspects, or is willing to discuss changes in how the organization operates, which Meadows brought up several times.

Meadows said he hears more complaints about the GHSA than any other topic.

“I get more phone calls on this than i do every piece of legislation y’all ever introduce. and basically, I am sick of it,” he said. “When I say that I get more complaints about you than I do about every bill that 236 people introduce, I’m not exaggerating that.”

His complaints and concerns were about all areas of the GHSA, ranging from playoff travel to finances regarding Georgia Public Television broadcasting postseason events to the size of the executive committee to cost of admission to games for students. And he noted finances and transparency.

“How many millions of dollars for whatever reason they have them, is that transparent?,” he said. “Do y’all know where it goes? Have you seen it?”

Russell pointed out that the GHSA undergoes a public audit and the budget is posted on the website and has been for several years. It is also discussed and disclosed at executive committee meetings, which are public.

Russell was unsure, when asked, if the GHSA — which began in 1908 — forwards a copy of the budget to any government entity, and said the GHSA keeps one year’s worth of the budget — about \$5 million — on reserve.

The bill is similar to one in Florida.

“The Florida model is a little bit troubling,” Russell said. “They tried it there, had lots of problems with it. It’s just kinda laissez-faire as far as eligibility, as far as transfers go, something that we would hate to see occur in the state of Georgia, because, historically, it’s been troublesome.”

Meadows’ responded, “And the Florida model, good bad or indifferent, it’s a start. Again, I need the assurances that y’all are fixing your problems, perceived or real. Otherwise, we’ll have a damn Florida ... excuse me.”

The new association would include state government involvement and has some controversial aspects, particularly regarding eligibility and transfers.

“The bylaws governing residence and transfer shall allow the student to be eligible in the school in which he or she first enrolls each school year or makes himself or herself a candidate for an athletic team by engaging in a practice prior to enrolling in any member school,” the bill states.

“The student shall be eligible in that school so long as he or she remains enrolled in that school.”

The translation is that an athlete can basically transfer anywhere for any reason and be immediately eligible wherever they start the school year. But the worries are more about the next part.

“Where the student lives, with whom the student lives, or which school the student attended the previous year shall not be a factor in determining eligibility.”

The new organization would have a 15-member board of directors consisting of four public school and four non-public school representatives — one each from four “administrative regions” — two representatives appointed by the State Board of Education, two school superintendents, two local board of education members, and the state superintendent or a designate from the Department of Education executive staff.

There would be a commissioner who “shall have the authority to waive the bylaws of the organization in order to comply with statutory changes.”

There would be a “liaison advisory committee” that would consist of 15 members, including a student-athlete, member of the news media, a member of the House and of the Senate, a parent of a high school student and a member of the business community.

And term limits would be part of the equation.

“Please, this is a work in progress,” Meadows said early in the hearing. “This bill is not the answer. This bill is the stick.”



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