

Ralston continues to fend off allegations of 'leave law' wrongdoing

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

Georgia's embattled House Speaker David Ralston continues to face bipartisan calls to resign amid a growing controversy surrounding his alleged abuse of the so-called "legislative leave law."

Essentially, the law allows for attorney members of the Georgia General Assembly to delay cases they're involved in indefinitely, or at least as long as they remain elected to the state's legislative body.

Ralston, a criminal defense attorney by trade, has rebuffed calls to resign, insisting that he has not done anything wrong in utilizing the law, which he helped to expand as a member of the state legislature in 2006.

"No action I have taken has been illegal, wrong, unethical or immoral," said Ralston in the state capital recently.

The origin of the law in question dates back to over 100 years ago, when Georgia legislators passed a law to allow attorney members to conduct state business without having to worry about the dispositions



Georgia House Speaker David Ralston

of their cases during 40-day regular sessions and special sessions.

As such, the law allows lawyer-legislators to delay all aspects of their cases during regular and special legislative sessions, plus three weeks after the close of such state business to enable them to catch up on the details of delayed cases.

The legislative leave law was amended in 2006, however, when Ralston and a majority of his fellow legislators succeeded in passing two

bills regarding continuances in criminal and civil procedures.

Amending the law effectively extended the ability of lawyer-legislators to request continuances outside of regular and special sessions by allowing them to cite legislative duties for leave purposes at any time of the year.

The amended portion of the law has come under fire most recently for several reasons.

For starters, the law removes any and all discretion by judges when it comes to granting continuances in cases involving an attorney member of the General Assembly. As long as a lawyer-legislator certifies that he or she has a legislative conflict, continuances must be granted.

Furthermore, the law allows attorney members of the General Assembly to self-certify that they are tied up with legislative duties, requiring nothing more than an assertion of conflict.

Overuse of the law by lawyer-legislators can result in years-long delays in cases, which is exactly what Ralston's critics claim is keeping many

of his clients from having to face justice.

The speaker has filed form letters citing the legislative leave law in four cases that are still outstanding in Towns and Union counties: Georgia v. Alfred Bouchard and Georgia v. John Michael Gowder in Blairsville; and Georgia v. Paul Jason Brothers and Georgia v. Gwendalynn Fay Smith in Hiawassee.

Alfred Bouchard's case involves terroristic threats he is alleged to have made in November 2016, and his case is

scheduled for a plea on April 24.

The state's case against Mike Gowder, dating back to a February 2016 arrest, is on hold pending an upcoming federal trial regarding prescription drug charges.

Gwendalynn Smith was indicted in April 2017 on five felony counts of making false statements, in which she is alleged to have lied about a rape at Young Harris College in October 2016 that never actually took place.

And the most serious

of Ralston's four outstanding cases as outlined above dates to October 2012, wherein Ralston's client, Paul Jason Brothers, is alleged to have raped a child in Towns County — a child who has had to grow up without seeing justice done.

In response to allegations of abuse regarding the state law, Ralston has stopped taking new clients until some of his bigger cases have been adjudicated.

He has also appointed a bipartisan advisory group "to examine the need for this law" and to recommend changes.

Band of Steel...from Page 1A



Woody Gap Principal Carol Knight dancing to steel drum music, pictured here with excited band members on March 16. Photo by Todd Forrest

Young Artists concert March 31

The Brasstown Concert Association presents its annual Young Artists Concert, featuring Mark Allen, piano; Jacob Bitinas, viola da gamba; and Mingdao Cabalas, cello. At 2:30 p.m. Sunday, March 31 in Keith House, John C. Campbell Folk School, Brasstown, NC. Admission is free. No reservations required.

For information contact a BCA Board member at 828-389-4210 or 828-837-3839, brasstownconcertnews@gmail.com or find us on Facebook. NT(Mar20,22)CA

Young Harris Jamboree

Country Western Jam Session at Stephens Lodge in Young Harris next door to Young Harris Pharmacy hosted by John Cochran and the Cowhands. First Friday of every month at 6:30 p.m. Free to all musicians and listeners. Food available. Food sales to raise funds for Young Harris Scholarship Fund. NT(Mar20,21)CA

Chayil Aponte crowned Woody Gap School 2019 Homecoming Queen



Woody Gap School senior Chayil Aponte was crowned 2019 Homecoming Queen on February 2, 2019. Escorting Aponte that evening was Joseph Corbin. Following graduation in May, she plans to attend either Young Harris College or the University of North Georgia in Dahlonega. Aponte is an Honor Roll student and member of the National Society of High School Scholars. Congratulations to Ms. Aponte on her royal achievement.

steel drum bands, and Roberts said sponsoring a music program centered on an instrument as obscure as the steel drum comes with a myriad of hurdles.

"The steel drum is a fabulous instrument, but there is no way to (easily) tune it," Roberts said. "By playing it, you are actually knocking it out of tune. So we try to work on playing soft, but they only last about half a year, then they need to be tuned."

"They have to be tuned by a master, and there are only about 10 total people in the whole country that can tune it. We have to hire someone to come down here, and it costs us about \$1,500 every time we need to have them tuned."

Anyone interested in hiring the band for a performance can contact Roberts at droberts@ucschools.org. The band is also seeking sponsors to purchase advertising space on its new equipment trailer.

"We're always looking for support, and it doesn't have to be massive amounts, we just want our students to be able to have all the same experiences that larger schools have," Roberts said. "Right now, we're selling ads to go on our trailer. They can be business sponsorships or just individual names. It's \$100 for a 1-foot-by-2-foot spot."

"For \$50, you can just put your name on there saying that you support the Band of Steel. All the money goes to

buying new equipment and updating our old equipment."

The Band of Steel's next performance will be at the Union County High School Spring Concert on April 30, and they will also put on a concert in Suches during the second full week of May.

"We want to thank everyone that came out and supported us tonight," Roberts said of the March 16 gala. "Also, we want to thank all of the people who have sponsored us so far. We would not be able to do this without them."

For additional details, including photos, concert dates and more, visit the Woody Gap Band of Steel Facebook page.