

## 'Fiscal restraint' part of Kemp's priorities

Governor also pushes for budget to include \$2K checks to teachers, other state employees and taxpayer rebates.



Gov. Brian Kemp, flanked by Speaker Jon Burns (left) and Lt. Gov. Burt Jones, waves after his final State of the State speech in the House of Representatives at the Capitol in Atlanta on Thursday. ARVIN TEMKAR/AJC

By David Wickert  
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Gov. Brian Kemp on Thursday unveiled plans to put more than \$2 billion back in the pockets of taxpayers through tax cuts and rebates. If approved by the General Assembly, the tax relief and budget proposals would cement Kemp's legacy of returning money to taxpayers. Since 2021, Georgia taxpayers have received more than \$9.7 billion in income, motor fuel and property tax relief.

"These investments were possible because we rejected the idea that,

just because government takes in more money, it should turn right around and spend it on more government," Kemp told lawmakers Thursday.

Delivering his final State of the State address at the Georgia State Capitol, Kemp announced plans to rebate \$1.2 billion in income taxes later this year. Single filers would receive up to \$250, heads of household would get up to \$375 and married couples filing jointly would get up to \$500.

If approved, it would be the fourth rebate in five years for Georgia taxpayers.

Kemp also announced plans to reduce Georgia's income tax rate from 5.19% to 4.99% this year. The governor and legislators have approved a series of cuts that have reduced Georgia's income tax rate from 5.75% in 2022.

The \$1 billion cost of the latest rate cut proposal is baked into Kemp's budget plans unveiled Thursday.

His \$42.3 billion revised general fund budget for fiscal year 2026, which ends in June, includes \$2,000 checks for teachers and other state employees. It's the latest in a series

Budget continued on A6

## Georgia hits insurance firms with \$25M in fines

But there'll be no restitution to mental health patients who weren't covered.

By Michelle Baruchman  
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The Georgia Department of Insurance is ordering nearly two dozen health insurance companies to pay fines totaling \$25 million for breaking state laws requiring them to cover mental health claims the same way they cover physical health.

Since August, when the violations initially were announced, investigators assessed \$5 million more for offenses, and additional fines were levied for not responding to inquiries in a timely manner.

The 22 insurance companies fined have 60 days to request a hearing with the state agency or appeal the fines to the Fulton County Superior Court. The list of companies includes Aetna, Humana and CareSource, along with other national insurers and many smaller companies.

"These companies are not above the law, and I am taking definitive action to hold them accountable for denying Georgians the care they need," Insurance Commissioner John King said in a statement.

King's office discovered more than 6,000 violations of a 2022 law requiring insurers to have the same copays, deductibles and number of sessions for anxiety, depression or addiction as for illnesses of the rest of the body. The investigation found some companies were inconsistently applying benefits and requiring patients to get approval before care even when it wasn't necessary.



John King

Insurance continued on A6



This Macon-area donkey arrived at Hannah Frost's farm last year looking malnourished and scrawny. Frost nursed her back to health. JOE KOVAC JR./AJC

## Hmm, are her ears burning? Georgia donkey sets record

At 15.8 inches (yes, longer than a foot), they're the world's longest ears.

By Joe Kovac Jr. | joe.kovac@ajc.com

BYRON — A donkey was eating her dinner the other evening at a tiny farm on the outskirts of Macon.

As she chomped timothy hay and oats from a red feed bucket, her ears, ever alert, sprang to attention.

One of the farm dogs, Loki the German shepherd, had barked at something. A squirrel maybe, nothing ominous. Still, for a moment, the donkey's ears, furry and brown and longer than bedroom slippers, stood sentry: majestic twin spires.

When they eventually swung low, outstretched at parade rest, they resembled wings, oars even, otherworldly appendages, each of them 15.8 inches long.

No ordinary ears are they. They're the longest donkey ears on earth.

Donkey continued on A6

## Governor redefines his legacy and looks ahead at a Capitol without him

Kemp's final state address reflects on record, warns of what could come next.

By Greg Bluestein  
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Gov. Brian Kemp's final State of the State address was less a wish list for the year ahead than a balance sheet of what he has built and what he wants protected once he's gone.

The two-term Republican touted a fourth \$1 billion tax rebate, another trim to Georgia's income tax and a one-time, \$2,000 supplement for state employees. Just as telling was what Kemp left out of his speech Thursday before a House chamber filled to the rafters.

There was no sweeping new initiative unveiled on the scale of last year's civil litigation overhaul. No opening salvo in a fresh culture-war fight. No revamp of his conservative vision of a limited Medicaid expansion.

Instead, Kemp signaled to his captive audience that in his final year in office he intends to wield the most



Legislators clap during Gov. Brian Kemp's final State of the State speech on Thursday. Kemp touted a fourth \$1 billion tax rebate, another trim to Georgia's income tax and a one-time supplement for state employees. ARVIN TEMKAR/AJC

powerful tool in his political arsenal — control of the state's purse strings — as the race for his job intensifies.

And as he looks toward an undeclared political trajectory after office and an unpredictable contest to suc-

ceed him, Kemp offered a cautionary note to the candidates now jockeying for position.

He did not explicitly reject Lt. Gov.

State continued on A6

### TODAY'S TOP STORIES INSIDE



METRO ATLANTA, A5

#### 2 shot, officer returns fire at warming shelter

An Old Fourth Ward recreation center, which was open Thursday for people seeking to escape the cold, turned into a crime scene when someone took a gun inside.



BUSINESS, A12

#### Coca-Cola halts efforts to sell off Costa Coffee

The coffee industry is facing headwinds and more consumers feel strapped, so Coke has ended talks with potential buyers after bids fell short of expectations.



OPINION, A13

#### AI could bring folks a better way of life

With people working fewer hours, work-life balance will improve, and the impact of the predicted labor shortage would be ameliorated, our guest contributor writes.



FALCONS, B1

#### 10 questions for team's coaching candidates

Matt Ryan, the team's incoming president of football, has plenty of discussion points for candidate interviews as the Falcons attempt to reverse their culture of losing.



GO GUIDE, C1

#### The stage is set again for Down Right Theatre

Eighteen years since the last production, three generations of the Ross family are reviving the long-dormant company with "Doubt: A Parable" in Doraville.

### INDEX