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Ralston questions need for 'religious freedom' bill

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Georgia House Speaker [David Ralston](#) Thursday questioned the need for controversial "religious freedom" legislation that is drawing fire from the business community.

For the second year in a row, conservative Republicans in the General Assembly are backing a bill that, on its face, would prohibit government agencies from interfering with an individual's right to "free exercise of religion."

But opponents, including civil rights groups, argue such a law would allow discrimination against gays and lesbians based on religious beliefs.

Advocates for Georgia businesses are worried the bill would hurt the state's image with corporate prospects, a similar argument business groups used more than a decade ago in a successful push to remove the Confederate battle emblem from the state flag.

The Georgia Chamber of Commerce would oppose "anything in any kind of bill that casts Georgia in a negative competitive light or is discriminatory in nature," chamber President and CEO [Chris Clark](#) said this week.

During a pre-legislative session news conference Thursday, Ralston, R-Blue Ridge, said religious freedom was important enough to America's founders that they included it in the U.S. Constitution.

But he questioned whether the General Assembly has anything worthwhile to add to the subject.

"What I'm going to look at is what does this bill do that the Constitution doesn't do?" the speaker said. "I want to understand the intensity of the opposition."

The Metro Atlanta Chamber also is going after the legislation. In its annual legislative policy agenda, the chamber calls for defending Georgia's reputation as a leading state for business against "legislative measures that would negatively impact our business climate and harm our ability to create, attract, retain and expand jobs."

Also during Thursday's briefing, Ralston vowed to support legislation legalizing the use of the marijuana derivative cannabidiol oil (CBD) to treat children with epilepsy and other seizure disorders. A medical marijuana bill died on the last day of last year's session.

Ralston declined to get out in front of discussions on whether lawmakers should clamp restrictions on Uber and other app-based ride-sharing services or discontinue the state tax credits flowing to purchasers of electric vehicles.

And he repeatedly deflected reporters' attempts to get him to commit on transportation funding, the issue expected to garner far and away the most attention during the 2015 session.

"I'm not endorsing any specific proposal today," Ralston said. "I am saying that doing nothing is not an option, and this is a good year to do something."

Dave Williams covers Government