

AJC AT THE GOLD DOME

Deal defends 'campus carry' bill

Governor says argument against bill 'lacks validity.'

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Gov. Nathan Deal and House Speaker David Ralston on Monday defended legislation to legalize firearms on college campuses, with the governor saying the existing argument against it "lacks validity."

House Bill 859, passed by the state House last week, would al-

low anyone 21 or older with a weapons license to carry a gun at a public college or university campus. Dormitories, fraternity and sorority houses, and athletic events would be excluded.

Critics of campus carry say the legislation could potentially create unsafe environments for students and faculty.

In an interview Monday, Deal said the same claims were made in 2014 when he signed legislation that vastly expanded where Georgians can legally carry firearms.

"We heard all the hype that we're now hearing about campus carry, all the predictions of tragedies. All the predictions that we were going to open our

state up to a Wild West scenario," the governor said.

Those earlier fears don't appear to have come true, Deal said.

"So, therefore, to use those kind of arguments with the campus carry discussion, I think lacks validity," he said.

During the 2014 gubernatorial campaign, Deal said he did "not believe we need guns in college areas where alcohol is being consumed and where there are ballgames and things of that nature."

Some college and university officials oppose campus carry, saying it would give stressed-out students access to guns and

add to their security costs.

When asked, Deal dismissed those arguments.

"I think they should be concerned about making sure that those students are taught and educated," he said. "That's their responsibility. The law will take care of the rest of it."

Ralston, a Blue Ridge Republican, met Monday with state Reps. Rick Jasperse, R-Jasper, and Mandi Ballinger, R-Canton, along with a lobbyist for a leading gun rights group.

"The speaker ardently supports the rights of law-abiding Georgians to protect themselves and enjoy outdoor pursuits like hunting and shooting

sports," Ralston spokesman Kaleb McMichen told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. "The House Republican Caucus remains committed to protecting the interests of responsible gun owners, and we encourage the Senate to consider and pass the Campus Safety Act and get it to Governor Deal's desk."

The bill won't run into any trouble with the head of the Senate, Lt. Gov. Casey Cagle.

Asked about the bill Monday, Cagle said, "I look forward to being at the governor's signing ceremony for the gun bill."

Staff writer Kristina Torres contributed to this article.