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FULL TEXT

Bill could ban most abortions in state

Times Daily

February 17, 2014

Mary Sell

MONTGOMERY — Some local pro-life Republicans are backing a bill that would ban many abortions in Alabama.

House Bill 490 is the "Fetal Heartbeat Act," one of four abortion-related pieces of legislation that will have public hearings in the House Health Committee on Wednesday.

The bill will make it unlawful for a physician to perform an abortion if a heartbeat can be detected. Medical experts said that can happen as early as around eight weeks.

Current law allows for abortions at up to 20 weeks of pregnancy.

Bill sponsor Rep. Mary Sue McClurkin, R-Pelham, said she hopes to reduce the number of abortions in the state.

"This bill specifically deals with killing a person with a heartbeat," McClurkin said Monday. "We wouldn't kill a person in a hospital with a heartbeat; we just wouldn't.

"It is just simply a bill that will require abortionists to check for the heartbeat, let the mother hear the heartbeat, and then, if there is a heartbeat, he cannot do the abortion."

There are about 26 co-sponsors on McClurkin's bill, including Rep. Ed Henry, R-Hartselle, Rep. Terri Collins, R-Decatur, and Rep. Lynn Greer, R-Rogersville.

"I'm pro-life, and I think anything we can do to reduce abortions, we need to do," Greer said Monday. He said he's not sure the legislation can pass.

"But at least we're making a statement," he said.

Collins said the goal of the bill, she's sure, is to decrease abortions.

"But it does have several exceptions for the life or the health of the mother," she said.

The bill would require the physician document the procedure used to determine a heartbeat. Not determining the presence of a heartbeat or performing an abortion when a heartbeat has been determined will be a Class C felony, according to the legislation, unless the abortion was medically necessary because the woman's life or health were at risk. The women would not be prosecuted under this legislation.

Similar bills have been introduced in a few other states in recent years. Opponents have said the bills essentially ban abortions.

McClurkin last year sponsored successful legislation to put more restrictions on abortion providers in the state. Proponents said the bill would make abortion safer; opponents said the legislation, which among other things required all abortion doctors to have admitting privileges at local hospitals, would simply shut them down.

That law is currently being contested in federal court.
48-hour wait

Henry has his own abortion-related legislation. House Bill 489 changes from 24 hours to 48 hours the required wait time between when a woman receives state-mandated information about an abortion and when the procedure can be performed.

Henry's bill changes the timing in the Woman's Right to Know Act, which requires abortion providers to give women information, including "agencies that offer assistance, adoption agencies, development of the unborn child, methods and risks of abortion and childbirth, father's obligations and alternatives to abortion."

Two years ago at an anti-abortion rally, Henry told the crowd that he regretted an abortion a former girlfriend had when he was younger.

"When we had ours, it was just drive and show up (and have the abortion)," he said. "I don't know if 48 hours would have made a difference, but I suspect it would have."

'Perinatal Hospice'

House Bill 493 from Rep. Kurt Wallace, R-Maplesville, is the "Perinatal Hospice Information Act." It's designed to encourage women not to abort fetuses that aren't likely to survive to birth or much longer afterward.

It would prohibit abortions based on a "lethal fetal anomaly" unless a woman has been made aware of available hospice services if she carries the fetus to term.

The bill defines lethal fetal anomaly as a condition diagnosed before birth that will likely result in the death of the unborn child within three months of birth.

Wallace said the more information women have about services available — including counseling and medical care that are available — the more likely they are not to abort.

But Wallace said there is nothing in his bill that prevents a woman from going ahead with an abortion.

"She has to get the information, what she does with it is up to her," he said.

If it became law, a violation of the act by an abortion provider would be a Class B misdemeanor. Patients would not be prosecuted.

The fourth bill, House Bill 494, changes the consent laws and process for minors seeking abortions.

All four abortion-related bills will have public hearings in the House Health Committee at 9 a.m. Wednesday in the Statehouse.

Nakima Williams, Planned Parent Southeast vice president of public policy, said Monday the bills are all designed to restrict access to legal abortions in Alabama. Planned Parenthood is urging people to speak against the bills on Wednesday.

And she urged lawmakers to consider expanding health care in the state, not limiting it.

"There is no talk of expanding Medicaid to ensure that a woman has the health care she needs, but we see bill after bill that restricts access to health care for women," Williams said.

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Bill would ban abortion after doctor hears heartbeat

The Anniston Star

February 17, 2014

Tim Lockette

MONTGOMERY — A committee in the Alabama House of Representatives plans to hold public hearings this week on four bills that would limit access to abortion — including one that would ban abortions after a fetus has a detectable heartbeat.

"It's no secret that I'm against abortion, and that's why I support the bill," said Rep. Becky Nordgren, R-Gadsden, a co-sponsor of the heartbeat bill.

The House Committee on Health has planned a public hearing Wednesday for HB490, a bill that would require an abortion doctor to assess whether a fetus has a heartbeat. Performing an abortion when a heartbeat is present would be a Class C felony, punishable by 1 to 10 years in prison. The bill states that a woman who gets an abortion would not be subject to criminal charges.

Attempts to reach the bill's sponsor, Rep. Mary Sue McClurkin, R-Indian Springs, were unsuccessful Monday.

McClurkin's bill is perhaps the most restrictive of the abortion bills expected to come before the Health Committee Wednesday. House members will also hold public hearings on a bill to require a 48-hour waiting period before an abortion, a bill to establish stricter rules for minors seeking an abortion and a bill to require abortion providers to tell a woman about the availability of hospice care for newborns if she's seeking an abortion because of a lethal fetal anomaly.

Shirley Ann Rawls, president of the Alabama branch of the National Organization for Women, said the fetal heartbeat bill wouldn't stand up in court.

"They're just trying to chip away at Roe v. Wade piece by piece," she said. "It's disappointing."

McClurkin sponsored a bill last year that imposed new regulations on abortion clinics, including a requirement that abortions be performed only by doctors with admitting privileges at local hospitals. Advocates of the restrictions said they were to make abortion safer, but pro-choice groups said they were an attempt to drive abortion providers out of business. The bill passed and is currently the subject of a federal court battle.

Michael Gladden, Nordgren's Democratic opponent in the 2014 election, said he's "personally against abortions," but felt the Legislature should spend its time on job creation and education.

"This is an important issue," he said. "However, we've got a lot of other issues that haven't already been decided by the Supreme Court."

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Remington plant, 2,000 jobs in Huntsville will grow advanced manufacturing base in north Alabama

Al.com

February 17, 2014

Lucy Berry

HUNTSVILLE, Alabama – Community leaders began packing the auditorium of the Chamber of Commerce of Huntsville/Madison County this afternoon to hear the news that Remington Outdoor Co. will expand with a new manufacturing facility in the Rocket City.

The plant, which will create 2,000 jobs over the next decade and reflect a statewide investment of \$110 million, will be located in the old Chrysler building near Huntsville International Airport. Operations are expected to begin in the next 18 months after the facility is upgraded.

The production and advanced manufacturing positions will pay between \$40,000 and \$50,000 before benefits, according to Huntsville Mayor Tommy Battle.

"We've always been known for engineering and research and development," he said. "We have a huge advanced manufacturing base that's really just not recognized, not touted a lot. This gives us a chance to start talking about our advanced manufacturing base and also, it addresses the need for jobs for those who want to go into the technical career fields."

At full employment, the new Remington plant will be the third-largest private employer in Madison County. Twenty-four states made proposals to Remington, which is the country's oldest firearms manufacturer.

Chip Cherry, chief executive officer of the Chamber of Commerce of Huntsville/Madison County, said the Remington facility will be a "great opportunity" for workers in the advanced manufacturing fields.

"Not everybody wants to be an engineer or be in a technical field," he said. "We think this is a great opportunity to grow that segment of the economy with a company that has a very rich history and makes a very good quality product."

Robert Mays, president of BlueCreek Investment Partners and new chairman of the Chamber of Commerce of Huntsville/Madison County, said the Remington plant "will lead to new opportunities" across Huntsville and north Alabama.

"It will add to the great corporate ecosystem we already have here in place," he said during the news conference. "We know this announcement is really just the beginning of a very long and productive partnership we're going to have with you and your company."

Remington, which looked at other sites in Alabama, has 19 locations in the U.S. The company grew from 2,400 employees in 2008 to 4,200 workers in late 2013.

"Our pro-business environment, along with the region's extensive manufacturing experience, helped us outmaneuver two dozen other states looking to attract Remington," Madison County Commission Chairman Dale Strong said in a statement. "This announcement represents new diversity to our local economy, and will provide an array of opportunities for skilled tradesmen, engineers and support personnel."

Rep. Mo Brooks, R-Huntsville, said Remington's decision to locate in Huntsville is timely as International Paper in Courtland prepares to shutter operations in March. Approximately 1,100 workers at the Lawrence County plant will be affected.

"Our partnership with Remington reinforces the Tennessee Valley's reputation for both our pro-growth policies and for being a great family-friendly place to live and work. No question, it helps that we believe in the Second Amendment Right to Bear Arms. It also helps that we don't believe in class-warfare and envy, rather, we believe in applauding success that is hard-earned, as Remington's has been."

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Want a job at the new Remington plant in Huntsville? Here's what you need to do now

Al.com

February 17, 2014

Lucy Berry

HUNTSVILLE, Alabama – Are you interested in landing one of the 2,000 full-time jobs at Remington Outdoor Co.'s new manufacturing plant in Huntsville?

Chip Cherry, chief executive officer of the Chamber of Commerce of Huntsville/Madison County, said it's still a little early, but prospective workers should begin seeking out educational opportunities now in north Alabama.

"For people who are really interested in going to work for them, they might want to evaluate the advanced manufacturing certificate programs they have at a couple of the local two-year institutions," he said. "I know there are going to be a lot of skilled workers in there working on machining metal and forging and that kind of thing."

Remington's new Huntsville plant won't be operational for another 12 to 15 months, but the state will begin scouting for a place to open a new workforce recruitment and training center in the coming days.

Remington is investing \$110 million in the new Huntsville facility, which will be located at the former Chrysler building near Huntsville International Airport. The factory will employ up to 2,000 workers in the production and advanced manufacturing fields.

Shane Davis, Huntsville's director of urban development, said the average annual salary for a plant worker in Huntsville before benefits will be \$42,000, or \$20.19 per hour.

Company officials are mum about what will be produced at the plant, but said today the facility could be used to develop new products and meet demand for oversold merchandise.

Alabama Industrial Development Training (AIDT) will provide pre-employment screening and training for the Remington plant as part of an incentive valued at \$15.9 million.

"As soon as Remington is ready, we're ready to partner with AIDT and our local community colleges to have job fairs," said Michelle Jordan, director of economic development for the city of Huntsville. "We want to make sure everyone throughout the community knows how to apply for these jobs, what the requirements are, and if they need any training, they know how to get that training."

City leaders will also reach out to the Huntsville City School system about workforce opportunities for high school students who may not want to attend a four-year university.

[Click here to read more about AIDT's program.](#)

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Alabama's incentive package for Remington gun plant: \$38M cash, tax breaks, extensive workforce recruitment and training

Al.com

February 17, 2014

Steve Doyle

HUNTSVILLE, Alabama – Alabama Commerce Secretary Greg Canfield said Remington Arms intends to spend about \$110 million turning the vacant former Chrysler electronics plant near Huntsville International Airport into a state-of-the-art firearms production facility that could open in early 2015.

Here's a quick look at what incentives the state, the cities of Huntsville and Athens, plus Madison, Limestone and Morgan counties have agreed to kick in to land the more than 2,000 jobs associated with Remington's first gun plant in the Southeastern U.S.

The total investment by state and local governments is \$68.9 million:

Alabama: According to a news release, the state will provide \$38.3 million to assist Remington in retrofitting and equipping the 843,000-square-foot former Chrysler plant at the corner of Wall-Triana Highway and Electronics Boulevard. In addition, the state has pledged to help Remington recruit and train workers for the Huntsville plant over a 10-year period -- an incentive valued at \$15.9M.

"It's a long-term commitment as the project takes shape," Canfield told AL.com following a Monday news conference at the Huntsville-Madison County Chamber of Commerce.

Also, Remington will receive tax abatements on the non-education share of state and local property and use taxes for 10 years. "Education is going to win from this," said Canfield.

He said the state in the coming days will begin scouting for space in Huntsville to open a Remington workforce recruitment and training center. Remington should be operational here in about a year, said Canfield, ramping up to "full employment" within six years.

The state says it will also provide \$150,000 worth of site preparation work at the future Remington plant.

Huntsville and Madison County: The two governments are teaming up to buy the former Chrysler plant for \$10.5 million and provide Remington another \$2 million for equipment. Mayor Tommy Battle said Remington will use the factory rent-free for 10 years as long as it meets employment targets included in a development agreement approved Monday afternoon by the City Council.

The city will transfer \$9.5 million from its capital fund to cover its share of the incentive package; Madison County commissioners are holding a work session Tuesday to consider a plan to provide \$3 million.

Commission Chairman Dale Strong said the county's proposed investment would pay for itself "hundreds of times over" in the form of 2,000 advanced manufacturing jobs, new home sales and other spinoff growth from bringing "the world's finest firearms company" to the Rocket City.

"People were wanting more to be done on economic development," said Strong. "I believe we've answered that call. Truly, this is going to be the shot heard round the world."

Athens and Limestone County: The City of Athens, Limestone County Commission and Limestone Economic Development Association are contributing a total of \$1 million to the Remington incentive package. The Remington plant will be located just a mile or so east of the Limestone County line.

"It will greatly benefit Limestone County with the creation of new jobs," said County Commission Chairman Stanley Menefee.

Battle said Huntsville's Industrial Development Board will pay Remington \$500,000 each time the company hits a key employment milestone. The four installments totaling \$2 million are due when Remington reaches 250, 500, 750 and 1,000 jobs in Huntsville.

Money for that employment bonus is coming from Limestone and Morgan counties and the City of Athens, said Battle.

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A step forward for Alabama's future

The Daily Home

February 17, 2014

Alabama's House of Representatives passed a dual enrollment bill last week 100-0 — a noteworthy accomplishment that makes you think the other side didn't show up. Actually there were five representatives who, for one reason or another, did not vote, but in a rare show of unity both Democrats and Republicans in Montgomery wanted this bill to pass.

The governor had already requested funding for dual enrollment in the Education Trust Fund Budget he recommended. A new program, the original request was for \$20 million. The governor recommended \$6 million.

The bill still has to pass the Senate before going to the governor's desk, but the slam dunk from the House suggests it has a good chance of making it through.

The bill would create up to \$10 million in scholarships funded by donations, with donors getting up to a 50 percent tax credit. It also allows up to 80 percent of the funds to be directed by the donor to specific programs and to specific two-year schools.

The intent of the bill seems to be consistent with the State Department of Education's Plan 2020, with its goal of producing "College and Career Ready" graduates.

The dual enrollment bill would enable high school students to graduate ready for good-paying skills such as welding and aircraft engine repair, and to potentially finish school with a high school diploma, an associate's degree, and a technical certificate in a marketable job skill all at the same time.

Dual enrollment is gaining in popularity nationwide. Programs are offered in 47 states and the District of Columbia, and the Education Commission of the States tracks policies and has noted many have been modified in recent years to improve delivery and quality.

Results suggest dual enrollment students who in dual enrollment programs are more likely to meet college readiness benchmarks, have higher grades in college and earn their college degrees.

Speaker of the House Mike Hubbard said the dropout rate had dropped dramatically in other states.

Since the program relies on donations, there's no guarantee the \$10 million will be reached. That number was chosen to limit the amount of money the Education Trust Fund could lose. The 50 percent tax credit would come off the top of money earmarked for education. Still, the bill would provide two dollars for education for each dollar lost. The main difference would be that the donor could be directing 80 percent of those dollars, instead of elected officials.

Five million dollars is a lot of money. But consider that our state's proposed education budget for 2014-2015 is \$5.991 billion. Billion with a 'B'. Five million is less than a tenth of one percent.

Still there have been some concerns expressed about the bill.

House Minority Leader Craig Ford said the \$5 million allocated for liability coverage for teachers could be removed from the budget. He argues first that teachers already have liability coverage either through their union or local school boards, or both, and second that another bill that just passed the House would provide statutory immunity for teachers and state employees while performing their jobs. If that bill becomes law, there would be no need for additional liability coverage.

The AEA has also expressed concerns were also raised about the provision allowing donors to direct where the funds are spent, raising concerns about fairness and equity in the distribution of state tax money. Some programs could boom while others go lacking, creating an uneven opportunity for training in different parts of the state.

Those are valid concerns, and we suspect we haven't heard the last of them.

But we think the House Democrats made the right choice in voting for the bill in spite of those concerns. If the proposal becomes law, and we think it should, there will still be opportunities for fine-tuning its provisions in the future if needed.

The bottom line: with this bill House members voted for a brighter future for a number of Alabama's high school students.

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Montevallo's American Village dedicates new veterans shrine and register

Al.com

February 17, 2014

Martin J. Reed

MONTEVALLO, Alabama -- One by one, the University of Alabama Army and Air Force ROTC candidates presented a box containing soil from American Battle Monuments Commission cemeteries and other sites around the world.

With a white-gloved left hand on bottom and the right firmly placed atop each box containing the hallowed ground from the locations, the names of the battle sites sounded from loudspeakers at the American Village: Normandy and Somme in Germany, Sicily-Rome in Italy, Arlington and Yorktown in the United States, Vietnam, Afghanistan and more.

"It is ground on which America's heroes stood up for their country and its freedoms," said Tom Butler, American Village's founding board chairman and trustee, just before each box went into the base of the statue titled "Liberty Uniting the Colonies" in front of the new National Veterans Shrine and Register of Honor at the Montevallo landmark.

The carefully choreographed ceremony marked the pinnacle of today's unveiling of the American Village's tribute to veterans of the United States during the two-hour-plus dedication attended by more than 500 people on Presidents Day.

The purpose of the addition is to preserve the legacy of the country's veterans for the benefit of future generations, said Tom Walker, American Village's president and chief executive officer. "Today our country faces a growing national amnesia" concerning the country's history and the vital role played by those in the military, he said.

"We must tell their stories," Walker said about the addition that includes a user-generated database accessible online and at the American Village. "The most important element will come from you."

The database found at www.veteransregisterofhonor.com as well as the shrine that is a replica of Carpenters' Hall in Philadelphia received their formal dedication with participation by U.S. Sen. Jeff Sessions, U.S. Rep. Spencer Bacchus, Alabama Lt. Gov. Kay Ivey, Alabama House Speaker Mike Hubbard and Mary Bomar, former director of the National Park Service.

"This National Shrine, I think, represents a brilliant idea for us to place here," with the use of technology, "the heritage and history of those who served us so well in the past," Sessions told the crowd.

The sacrifices of the country's military men and women in history cannot be forgotten, Bomar said. "I hope we will understand that as citizens of this great nation, we cannot simply go along for the ride," she said.

Ivey urged those in attendance to help tell their veterans' stories. "I challenge you to honor our veterans and to teach their stories to the young people," she said.

Many times throughout the ceremony, veterans received recognition and praise from the speakers and audience members. Many military men and women often saluted and returned the gratitude.

Lt. Gen. David Fadok, commander and president of Air University at Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, thanked the American Village "for the honor and respect the National Veterans Shrine bestows on us and this great nation."

"I think it's absolutely fitting," said Christana Hudson-Frazier, a Desert Storm veteran with the American Legion in Northport. The importance of veterans should be preserved and "we should leave that legacy to our children. This is so fitting and it couldn't be done in a better fashion," she said.

Montgomery-based American Legion Department Commander George Krigbaum called the monument "beautiful" and a benefit to the public. "This has just been a remarkable portrayal of the heritage that needs to be saved, the history," he said.

While the building's brick exterior reflects the historic Philadelphia building, the inside provides computer kiosks for the database and displays works of art specially made for the American Village. Included are nine paintings on walls as well as a 100-foot frieze near the ceiling created by Peter Waddell of Washington, D.C.

"This project is really the result of one man's vision -- Tom Walker," said Waddell, who has created artwork for the U.S. Capitol and Mount Vernon, the monument dedicated to George Washington's home.

The shrine's groundbreaking happened July 4, 2012. Today's dedication ceremony happened on Washington's 282nd birthday.

"Almost 20 years ago, Tom Walker drew on a napkin ... the dream of the place that would attempt to reverse the historical illiteracy" growing in the nation, said Cathy Randall, the American Village's board chairwoman. "This is Tom Walker's dream and we are here because of that dream."

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This week in the Legislature: General Fund may make appearance

Montgomery Advertiser

February 17, 2014

Kala Kachmar and Brian Lyman

A look ahead at the week in the Legislature. All events subject to change.

House of Representatives

The House is scheduled to return at 1 p.m. Tuesday.

In committee:

- The House Health Committee meets at 9 a.m. Wednesday and is scheduled to discuss two abortion-related bills, one that would put limits on abortions performed on minors 18 and

younger, and one that would require a pregnant woman seeking termination because of a fetal lethal abnormality to seek information about the availability of hospice for the infant.

- The House Judiciary Committee meets at noon Wednesday, and is scheduled to discuss a bill that would keep the identities of those involved in state executions of inmates sentenced to capital punishment confidential. It may also discuss a bill that would address the rights of grandparents in certain situations.
- The Education Policy Committee meets at 3 p.m. Wednesday, and is scheduled to discuss and vote on two bills related to religion in schools.
- The House Ways and Means General Fund Committee meets at 1:30 p.m. Wednesday, and is scheduled to take up the proposed General Fund budget for fiscal year 2015.

Senate

The Senate is scheduled to return at 1 p.m. Tuesday. Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh's office said they planned to take up legislation known as the Taxpayer's Bill of Rights on Tuesday.

In committee:

- The Senate's Finance and Taxation Education Committee meets at 10:30 a.m. Wednesday, and is scheduled to take up legislation from Sen. Gerald Dial, R-Lineville, that would phase out the state's sales tax on groceries by 2017. The bill would raise the general state sales tax rate to five percent during that time.
- The Senate Judiciary Committee meets at 1 p.m. Wednesday, and is scheduled to take up a bill from Rep. Bill Poole, R-Tuscaloosa, that would allow warrantless arrests for those trespassing on school property.
- The Senate's Constitution and Elections Committee meets at 2:30 p.m. Wednesday, and is scheduled to hold hearings on changes to the Alabama Constitution as proposed by the Constitution Revision Commission.

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Alabama bill would allow agreement with colleges from other states offering online courses

The Associated Press

February 17, 2014

MONTGOMERY, Alabama — Alabama lawmakers are considering legislation to allow the state's colleges and universities to participate in reciprocal online course offerings with schools in other states.

The Tuscaloosa News reports House Bill 321 is sponsored by Rep. Bill Poole, a Tuscaloosa Republican. Poole says he met with the Alabama Commission on Higher Education and educators when he crafted the bill.

The legislation would tweak part of Alabama law to allow accredited out-of-state schools participating in a regional agreement approved by the governor to operate in Alabama.

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools would likely be the accrediting authority, and the agreement would be overseen by the Southern Regional Education Board, said Alabama Commission on Higher Education Director Gregory Fitch. He added that the bill would streamline the method out of states institutions would have to use to operate in Alabama under certain conditions. "The key to it is they have to be part of the agreement," he said.

States included in the Southern Regional Education Board are Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia.

The bill has won support from some University System of Alabama officials.

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Half of Alabama's workforce could retire today, two-year college chancellor says

Al.com

February 18, 2014

Evan Belanger

MONTGOMERY, Alabama -- Just 56 percent of Alabama public high school graduates go on to enroll in college compared to the national average of 68 percent.

That's what Alabama Community College System Chancellor Mark Heinrich had to say this month about the future of Alabama's workforce.

And if something isn't done to replace retiring baby boomers, who worked longer than expected because of the recession, Alabama's business and industry could face a shortage of qualified workers.

"If we do nothing, we will have a workforce crisis," Heinrich said.

"In fact, when we talk to the folks in business and industry, they're talking in terms of 50 percent of their workforce could retire today if they wanted. So far, the economy has kept them in place."

If the state can't get more students into the college pipeline and hurry their path to the workforce, Heinrich said, employers may think twice about expanding their existing operations in Alabama.

They could also be forced to recruit qualified workers from other states, leaving even fewer job opportunities for native Alabamians.

"We know that 28 of the 34 fastest growing occupations require a community college background or a community college degree," he said.

According to Heinrich, there are already significant shortages of industrial management workers -- those who keep robots working on assembly lines -- welders and nurses.

Thus far, the state's efforts to boost its trained workforce has focused primarily on dual enrollment between public high schools and the community college system.

Dual enrollment enables teens to earn college credit at local community colleges while still enrolled in high school. The head start helps them finish college and enter the workforce faster.

To boost the program, Heinrich called on the state last year to make dual enrollment free. That would encourage more students to enter college and make college cheaper by reducing the number of required credit hours for which student must pay.

While the two-year college system estimates that 15,000 of its students transfer to four-year schools annually, efforts thus far focus more on students who plan to seek jobs immediately after community college.

A bill in the State Legislature this session would authorize a \$10 million scholarship program toward that end.

However, instead of the state footing the bill, the scholarships would be funded through donations from business and industry, up to 50 percent of which would be tax deductible.

It would also allow dual enrollment programs to be tailored with specific employers in mind as long as a regional workforce council determines it is justified.

But neighboring states are positioning themselves to outpace Alabama in the race to cheap tuition and a qualified workforce.

In recent weeks, lawmakers in Tennessee and Mississippi have proposed making the first two years of community college free for any students who graduate high school in their states.

The Tennessee proposal would use state lottery reserves to create an endowment to pay for the program at an estimated cost of \$34 million for the first year, according to The Chronicle of Higher Education.

In Mississippi, which has no lottery, lawmakers say paying everyone's tuition in the 75,000-student system would cost less than \$4.5 million a year, according to The Sun-Herald.

Lawmakers in Oregon are pushing a similar free-tuition plan.

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Fighting poverty? GOP sticks with pro-business, school choice, lean government theme

Al.com

February 17, 2014

Mike Cason

MONTGOMERY, Alabama --- The Republican-led Alabama Legislature's answer to poverty and other long-term problems is to promote business, lean government and school choice, GOP leaders say.

But as the 2014 legislative session hits the halfway point Tuesday, some say that's not doing much to help a poor state where about one in five depend on food stamps.

House Speaker Mike Hubbard, R-Auburn and Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh, R-Anniston, say they are sticking with the theme set when Republicans captured the State House in 2010.

"Making more jobs available for people, that's the way you get out of poverty," Hubbard said.

Republicans oppose what would bring the most immediate help, expanding Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act.

Democratic Sen. Roger Bedford of Russellville said Republicans "should be ashamed." Bedford said expansion would help more people get preventive care, stay healthy enough to work and avoid costly emergency room care.

"So if you really want to do away with poverty or minimize its impact in Alabama, you've got to have a health care system that covers working Alabamians who are making the minimum wage or slightly over it," Bedford said.

Bedford is sponsor of a bill calling for Alabama to expand Medicaid, but it has not moved.

arthur orr and roger bedford horizontal.JPG

Sen. Arthur Orr, R-Decatur, left, talks to Sen. Roger Bedford, D-Russellville, on the Senate floor on Jan. 21, 2014 in Montgomery, Ala. (Julie Bennett/jbennett@al.com)

Gov. Robert Bentley began the legislative session a few weeks ago with a speech saying that expanding the private sector, not Medicaid, is the way out of poverty.

"The only thing that we're doing, not only as a Legislature but me as governor is to try to continue every day to create jobs in the state," the governor said Saturday.

What exactly is being done? The Republican leadership is moving a number of business-friendly bills this session. The bills would:

--- Help start-up businesses raise capital through crowdfunding.

--- Change the law so that fewer businesses will have to make estimated sales tax payments in advance, rather than paying the amount that actually comes in.

--- Set up an independent board to hear taxpayer disputes instead of a division within the Department of Revenue.

--- Set up a council of business leaders to advise colleges and schools on workforce needs.

Other GOP bills address education. They would help high school students take dual enrollment technical courses at community colleges, protect private schools from state regulation and protect local school boards from unfunded mandates.

'Can't afford what we have now'

As for Medicaid, Republican leaders say it would be irresponsible to expand a program that already consumes more than one-third of the General Fund. The federal government would pay for expansion the first three years under Obamacare, but the state would eventually have to pay 10 percent.

"The easy thing would be, 'OK, let's expand Medicaid and take all this money and add 300,000 people to the rolls,'" Hubbard said. "Then when we have to come up with our 10 percent match, we've got no way to do it. We can't afford what we have right now."

Kimble Forrister, executive director of Alabama Arise, which advocates for low-income families, said expansion would not only help the working poor but also pump new life into the economy.

Forrister cited a UAB study that found the new economic activity generated by the infusion of federal dollars would more than offset Alabama's cost of expanding Medicaid through 2020.

"Their assumptions were extremely conservative," Forrister said "They showed the new revenue would exceed the cost by \$900 million."

Democratic Rep. Craig Ford of Gadsden, the House minority leader, says Republicans oppose Medicaid expansion for political reasons during an election year. He said it shouldn't matter that expansion is tied to President Obama's signature law.

"We're leaving people's taxpaying dollars back in Washington when it should be coming back here to Alabama," Ford said.

Last year, the Legislature approved a system of managed care groups to run Medicaid services. That change is still in the works. The goal is to slow the growth in costs and improve care.

"It's going to be at least another year before we know the effect of that and if the savings are there that they claim are going to be there," Marsh said.

Payday loan rates a perennial issue

Even with Medicaid expansion at a stalemate, Alabama Arise's Forrister says the Legislature could still help the poor by finally addressing other perennial issues, such as tighter regulation of consumer lending. Democratic lawmakers are sponsoring bills in the House to reduce the triple-

digit annual interest rates charged on payday loans and car title loans. Similar legislation has failed in recent years and the bills stalled in a House committee last week.

Forrister said the issue is critical as more families have turned to the costly loans after the recession reduced incomes for many.

“They are squeezing the few assets a drowning family has out of them,” Forrister said.

Some Republicans support efforts to tighten regulations on lenders. Marsh proposed a bill last year and Sen. Scott Beason, R-Gardendale, plans to try this year.

Bentley supports cutting rates on the loans.

“I know the loan institutions have to make a living,” the governor said. “But these are exorbitant rates, and people who are the most disadvantaged are the ones who are having to borrow this, and we just need to help some of these people who get into difficulties.”

Hubbard said the Alabama Accountability Act, passed last year, is a weapon in the long-term war against poverty because it gives families more school choice. The bill provides tax credits to help pay private school tuitions and help children transfer from failing schools.

Critics of the law say it doesn't help much in poor areas with few private schools. Hubbard said the \$25 million annual scholarship program that is also part of the new law will change that. “That is going to be a game-changer and we will see more opportunities open up for these kids,” he said. “Before this, there was really no reason to have a school because there was no access. The parents were not in a financial situation to even send their kids to a school. This thing is going to take a little while to work, but it is already working and it will continue to work.”

Republicans say a bill to set up a \$10 million scholarship program for high school students to take job training classes at community colleges will cut the dropout rate.

“It's a proven fact that dual enrollment, where you can find a kid's interest and what they want to do from a career standpoint, you get them in that early, they understand a reason to stay in school,” Hubbard said.

Bedford and Ford both support the dual enrollment bill.

"There's great demand out there for skilled electricians, plumbers, bricklayers, that type of things," Bedford said. "Those are jobs that have meaning and value."

The scholarships will be funded by donations. Taxpayers and businesses will get a tax credit equal to 50 percent of their donations, up to a statewide cap of \$5 million, which will come from the Education Trust Fund.

Ford said there were better ways to fund the scholarships than taking money from the ETF. He suggested eliminating a liability insurance program for educators created by the Legislature last

year. Ford said the insurance was not needed and Republicans passed it purely to take a swipe at the AEA, which provides insurance for members.

No movement on lottery

Senate Minority Leader Vivian Figures, D-Mobile, said she would like to see more done to directly help families escape poverty, such as more help with child care for the working poor. Figures said numbers don't support Republican claims of success about creating jobs. The unemployment rate has declined, but the state's labor force also shrank in 2013.

"They're not doing anything directly policy-wise," Figures said. "They say they're bringing in jobs, but the statistics show Alabama has lost jobs."

Figures said she would like to see a state vote on a lottery. Ford has proposed a constitutional amendment to set up a lottery to support college scholarships for A/B students and the hiring of school police officers. But the bill has not moved.

The Legislature still has to pass both state budgets this year. The General Fund budget will be heard in committee this week. It is expected to call for level funding for most state agencies.

For several years, Republicans have moved to cut government overhead, including last year's bills to consolidate law enforcement and information technology. Marsh says that could eventually save enough to put 100 more state troopers on the road save tens of millions on IT services.

Many state agencies have fewer employees because of attrition.

marsh.jpg

Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh, R-Anniston

"All these agencies have been cut, some of them as much as 40 percent, and yet when I go home, I'm not having my constituents come to me and say, 'Del, we're not getting our services. We're not getting the things we used to get from state government,'" Marsh said. "I believe that they were fat and we have worked to right-size them."

House Minority Leader Ford said he does hear from teachers and state employees who are concerned about the results of funding cuts.

"I hear from classroom teachers on a daily basis saying that they're teaching over 20 students in each classroom and how they have less money for public education in their classroom where the rubber meets the road," Ford said.

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House to hold vote on increasing statute of limitations for crimes

Times Daily

February 16, 2014

Wayne Smith

A bill that would increase the statute of limitations for serious crimes is ready for a vote in the Alabama House of Representatives.

Alabama Securities Commission Director Joseph Borg said the bill is an important one in that it increases the statute of limitations from three to five years on securities and financial fraud, as well as other major crimes that currently have a three-year statute.

“Under current law, the three years starts whenever the crime started,” said Borg. “Most of the larger security cases have a large amount of financial documents that may take years to discover.

“This bill not only increases the time to five years, but also pushes back the time of the crime to when it was discovered.”

Alabama Rep. Paul DeMarco, R-Jefferson, chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, announced Thursday that House Bill 325 has moved out of committee and is ready for a vote in the House.

As the sponsor, DeMarco said, “I sincerely believe that this bill will significantly help Alabamians protect their financial investments in the future. We can’t afford to let criminals get away with cheating people out of their life savings, and this bill will improve the ability of law enforcement officials to prosecute criminals who orchestrate long-term financial and investment schemes.”

DeMarco said he hopes the bill comes to a vote within the next two weeks.

Borg said the bill is important and will significantly assist law enforcement in the prosecution of serious crimes that are categorized as felonies in Alabama.

Currently, the state only has three years to investigate and prosecute most felony offenses. Most states and the federal government provide for longer periods of time.

The additional time will significantly aid law enforcement in gathering evidence that could lead to charges, Borg said. He said complex economic and financial crimes are difficult to detect and are often not reported to law enforcement until after the present three-year statute of limitations has already lapsed.

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Payday legislation gets second wind

Times Daily

February 16, 2013

Mary Sell

MONTGOMERY — Local communities and advocacy groups that are looking to the state Legislature for more stringent regulations on payday lending brokers may have reason for hope this session.

A regulatory bill stalled in a House committee last week, but now two senators are considering their own bills.

Sen. Arthur Orr, R-Decatur, said he was going to study during the weekend what other states have done and what could be applied here.

“In general, we need to make changes to the existing law,” Orr said. “I’m interested in seeing something advance this year.”

Though advocates for regulation speak of annual interest rates of more than 400 percent and said the loans are designed to trap people who can least afford them, bills to restrict payday lenders have had little success in previous legislative sessions.

Rep. Todd’s bill

The bill that was derailed last week was from Rep. Patricia Todd, D-Birmingham.

It would require that payday lenders be licensed by the state banking department, limit the interest rates paid on loans to 36 percent and limit loans to no more than six in a 12-month period. Todd’s bill also would require lenders to offer installment plans for repayment and forbid lenders from going to people’s homes to collect money.

Orr said he wants to talk to Todd about where the major pushback to her bill originates.

Max Wood, president of Borrow Smart, a payday industry group, did not return calls late last week. He has previously said legislation such as Todd’s would shut down the businesses designed for short-term loaning.

Jay McDuffie, owner of the Check Depot chain in Birmingham, said at a public hearing last week there are more expensive alternatives than payday loans, such as bank overdraft fees or utility re-connection fees.

But at least one other senator thinks the loans can be immoral.

“I don’t know where the line between regular interest rates ends and usury begins, but I know we’re way over that,” said Sen. Scott Beason, R-Gardendale.

He said his bill would combine some of Todd’s with another house bill to restrict the interest on car title loans.

Beason said he is pro-business, and a free market has its place, “But in a society, there has to be rules and boundaries, and I think usury is one of those things that is wrong.”

Community concerns

Muscle Shoals is among the Alabama cities that has debated regulating the payday loan industry.

Mayor David Bradford said the city is studying where the lenders are locating and possible zoning changes.

“They all seem to be grouped into one area,” Bradford said. “We’re trying to look at some ways we can regulate them in terms of density and where they are. We were hoping the state could look at some regulations as well.”

If the state regulates banks, it should regulate loan companies, he said.

“Some operate almost like a pawn shop where they end up with someone’s car,” Bradford said. “We do realize it’s a business transaction, but you worry about citizens having transportation and being able to afford things.”

Meanwhile, Bradford described the taxes that payday lenders contribute to city coffers as “minimal.”

Contribution concerns

In the House committee that voted to delay Todd’s bill, a move she said essentially killed it, campaign finance records show that the lenders and a related political action committee had contributed to six of the nine committee members, the Associated Press reported last week.

The cumulative contributions ranged from \$1,000 to \$3,900 per lawmaker.

The contributions are legal, but Todd called them “disgusting” and a factor in last week’s vote.

Committee member Rep. Marcel Black, D-Tuscumbia, said the \$1,000 he recently received from the company Title Max, or any other contribution he receives, doesn’t have bearing on his votes.

“You can say that about any contribution, from Alabama Power to the Christian Coalition,” he said. As long as contributions are legally made and reported, there’s no wrongdoing.

Black has about \$102,000 in campaign contributions in the 2014 election cycle.

“I would hope that any contributions I receive, it’s because they think I’m a good person for the job,” Black said.

Black didn’t participate in the voice vote on Todd’s bill, he said, because “it was already over with.”

But, he thinks the Legislature will have to vote one way or another on payday lenders.

“It deserves an up or down vote,” he said. “At some point, we’re going to have to deal with it. That bill is not going away.”

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Circling the wagons: More state legislators present bills aiming to expand, change and charge Birmingham Water Works Board

Al.com

February 18, 2014

Joseph D. Bryant

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama -- For months, Birmingham Water Works and city officials have braced for proposals from Sen. Jabo Waggoner and Paul DeMarco that would bring new rules and change the composition of the state's largest water utility.

In recent days, several other legislators have lined up to submitted bills that would expand the board, implement new rules, and even create new fees for the utility. In all, four bills have been submitted.

Waggoner, R-Vestavia Hills, and DeMarco, R-Homewood, were the earliest advocates for term limits, mandatory public hearings before rate increases and expansion of the board to include members from five counties.

Those lawmakers now have plenty of allies this session.

The latest bills from State Reps. David Standridge, R-Blount County, and Rep. Jim McClendon, R-St. Clair County, largely mirror existing proposals from DeMarco and Waggoner, but go further both in direct and indirect goals tailored for their individual counties.

An agenda for each county:

For example Standridge's bill would require the Water Works to pay a fee for tapping water from some its largest reservoirs including Inland Lake in Blount County.

"The Blount County residents feel that's a natural resource of Blount County," Standridge told AL.com. "Some water there is turned around and sold to systems in Blount County."

Under the proposal the utility would pay a "withdrawal fee" to the county of five cents per thousand gallons withdrawn.

The Water Works could pay between \$912,500 to more than a \$1.09 million a year alone to use Inland Lake, where 50 to 60 million gallons are withdrawn daily.

Standridge said the Water Works' use of Inland Lake, which it owns, has been a long source of controversy among his constituents.

Standridge called it a matter of fairness that the utility leave something monetary behind since the operation thrives by taking a natural resource from Blount County.

"It has been discussed several different times and we've never been able to get anywhere just by talking and negotiating," he said. "It's one of those things that people are obviously concerned about in my district."

Standridge said he based his nickel fee on what the Blount County Water Authority charges its customers for raw water.

In St. Clair County, McClendon's bills also calls for board expansion. But McClendon said his primary objective is getting enough new members on an expanded Water Works Board to sell the Moody water system back to the city of Moody. Birmingham bought the system in the early 1990s.

Once the system is sold back to Moody, then the St. Clair board member would leave Birmingham's board, McClendon said.

"There's going to be an opportunity to discuss options with them," McClendon said at a meeting Monday. "Until I hear something different, my intention is to plow straight ahead."

A hearing on McClendon's bill is Wednesday at the State House.

Mathematical tug of war:

Birmingham with about 78,000 customers is the largest single municipality in the system. Jefferson County water customers outside the city represent the largest base for the utility with about 98,000 ratepayers.

Another 18,239 customers come from the surrounding four counties, Blount, Shelby, St. Clair and Walker.

Water works board.jpg

Birmingham Water Works Chairman Jackie Robinson, members George Munchus, Ann Florie, David Herring and Sherry Lewis.

Water Works Board members frequently cite customer numbers and the 95.4 percent revenue from Birmingham and Jefferson County as evidence against expanding the utility's oversight board.

Conversely, Wagoner and others say numbers provide supporting evidence their legislation. Wagoner called it simple.

"A majority of the customers are outside the city of Birmingham, so a majority of the board out to be outside the city of Birmingham," he told AL.com.

Waggoner's bill includes a provision giving Jefferson County appointing authority for one member who does not live within the city of Birmingham.

Jefferson County representation would be in addition to new members from Shelby, Blount, St. Clair and Walker Counties. If approved, the nine member board would be comprised of five from outside the city and just four from Birmingham.

The Water Works reports just 348 connections in Blount County. The smallest reported usage in the system is in Walker County with just 17 connections.

Standridge said a seat for Blount County seat is justified, specifically because of Inland Lake.

"Obviously the biggest issue in Blount County would be the water that's taken from Inland Lake," he said.

DeMarco concurred, noting that surrounding counties served by the Water Works not only provide customers, but are also major water sources for the system.

"It's also the resources," he said. "All they've simply asked was to have some sort of input or say and knowledge of what's going on with the resources within their community."

Water Works officials in response to possible board expansion the board have commissioned a study of possibly ending service in areas outside Jefferson County. Such action would mean selling off portions of the system and shrinking.

Board Chairman Jackie Robinson has said outside counties with complaints about Birmingham's management might be better served elsewhere.

Robinson has declined to elaborate on the possibility until a report is presented this week.

Not wasting time:

Each Republican lawmaker said they were willing to have more conversation before final votes on their bills, but were adamant about their goals.

Republicans have significant majorities in both the House and Senate, while Birmingham's delegation is composed of the Democratic minority.

McClendon at Monday's meeting with St. Clair officials, warned against delaying too long to bring the bills to a vote.

He said Water Works lobbyists Fine Geddie & Associates who asked him to give them more time before proceeding, but McClendon said he's under no obligation to do so.

Water Works and Birmingham city officials collectively oppose all the legislation to change the composition of the utility's board and have sent teams of lobbyists to the State House.

"The number one reason bills die is because the time runs out," McClendon said. "They've got some strong lobbyists down there. That's something you've got to work on."

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New Beason-sponsored gun bill would legalize pistols in cars without concealed carry permits

Al.com

February 17, 2014

Kyle Whitmire

MONTGOMERY, Alabama -- State Sen. Scott Beason, R-Gardendale, wants to make it legal to carry a loaded handgun in your car without a concealed carry permit and has introduced a bill to relax the law.

Beason's proposed change to the law comes a year after the Alabama Legislature made major changes to the law for carrying weapons.

(You can read about those 2013 changes [here](#).)

Under the current law, it is legal to carry a weapon in a vehicle without a permit if the weapon is unloaded and out of reach of anyone in the car.

"If you pull someone over for a real good reason, then you don't need to take them to jail for a gun crime."

"It's the same thing I started out with last year," Beason said in an interview Monday. "I don't think you should have to pay for your second amendment rights."

Beason said that it bothered him that law enforcement can charge a driver with a gun crime, even when there might not have been a cause for a search when a driver is pulled over.

"If you pull someone over for a real good reason, then you don't need to take them to jail for a gun crime," he said. "You've already got a good reason."

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Conservative group to bring its anti-union campaign to Alabama

Al.com

February 17, 2014

Dawn Kent Azok

A conservative group with ties to anti-tax activist Grover Norquist is bringing its anti-union campaign to Alabama's Mercedes-Benz plant, where the United Auto Workers is trying to organize.

The Center for Worker Freedom helped defeat a UAW drive at the Volkswagen plant in Chattanooga, Tenn., last week in an effort that include billboards, radio ads and town hall meetings.

There has been speculation that a UAW loss at Volkswagen would sap its attempts to organize other auto plants in the South.

But it could actually make the union redouble its efforts elsewhere, including Mercedes in Tuscaloosa County, because it needs a victory now more than ever, said Matt Patterson, executive director of the Center for Worker Freedom.

"This is not a threat that is going away," he said.

The Center for Worker Freedom is a special project of Norquist's Americans For Tax Reform. The group has not disclosed how much it spent on its efforts in Chattanooga, and Patterson declined to discuss the particulars of funding.

He said he will be in Alabama next week, meeting with community and business leaders.

Patterson's message is that the UAW is bad for business and it is intertwined with the bankruptcy of Detroit, the longtime hub of the U.S. auto industry.

"We'll be starting a coalition and getting a ground game going there, meeting people and learning about the concerns of the community," he said. "We hope that the business community of Tuscaloosa will not be late to realize the threat that the union poses."

On Saturday, a leader of the UAW effort at Mercedes said the goal of organizing a union at the plant has not changed.

Mercedes employee Jim Spitzley blamed groups like Patterson's and Tennessee state politicians for scaring Volkswagen workers.

"All transnational automotive plant workers need to wake up and fight for what's right in the workplace, and that's having a voice in the workplace," he said.

Other issues among employees who support the UAW is Mercedes' use of temporary workers at the plant.

They also have accused their employer of harassment and intimidation amid the union campaign. Mercedes says it has done nothing improper.