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Thursday, February 20, 2014

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FULL TEXT

Auburn receives three industrial development grants

Opelika-Auburn News
February 19, 2014

The city of Auburn has received three industrial development grants from the State Industrial Development Authority.

Alabama House Speaker Mike Hubbard (R-Auburn) announced the grants Wednesday in a press release.

“My main focus as the State Representative for House District 79 has been creating jobs, recruiting industry, and growing the economy,” said Hubbard. “Auburn is blessed to have incredible leadership on all levels of government and working together we will continue to have great success in attracting new industries and expanding existing ones. The selection of three Auburn projects proves that our efforts are working and are recognized across the state.”

The funds are provided to prepare a project site for a new facility, rehabilitation of an existing facility or an expansion of an existing facility. Auburn’s Industrial Development Board received grants for three projects:

» \$65,588.80 to Arkal Automotive USA, Inc. for construction of a new industrial building and related manufacturing equipment that prepares plastic mold injection for the automotive industry. The capital investment is \$6,558,879 and 32 jobs.

» \$70,723.58 for Pyongsan America, Inc. for construction of an expansion to a previously vacated industrial building and related manufacturing equipment and customer tooling that is involved in the pipe and hose assembly/manufacturing for the automotive industry. The capital investment is \$7,072,358 and 51 jobs.

» \$128,977.12 for CNJ, Inc. for the expansion of an existing building and related manufacturing equipment that serves the automotive industry by producing brake discs. The capital investment is \$17,196,949 and 84 jobs.

Hubbard added, “As a Member of the State Industrial Development Authority I am proud to have played a role in securing these funds for Auburn. Our community has a tremendous workforce, strong business community, and hardworking leadership that will continue to do everything we can to make Auburn as business-friendly as possible.”

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Industrial development continues to grow in Auburn

WTVM

February 19, 2014

Annie Hubbell

AUBURN, AL (WTVM) -

The City of Auburn is continuing to grow.

Alabama Speaker of the House Mike Hubbard announced Wednesday three industrial development grants from the State Industrial Development Authority for projects in Auburn.

"The Industrial Grants Program is to provide state assistance to encourage industries to locate to Alabama and to expand in Alabama. The industry grants provided a range of things from building roads to provide access to new industrial buildings and it all ties back to creating jobs and that what is all about, creating private sector jobs," says Hubbard.

The funds are provided to the Grantee for use in preparation of a Project Site for qualifying projects that are a new facility, rehabilitation of an existing facility or an expansion of an existing facility.

"It's an incentive that is granted to industry to help defray part of their cost of starting their facility, so it gets reimburse back to them, but it's based on investment, how much investment they make in the project," explains Philip Dunlap, City of Auburn's Director of Economic Development.

The City of Auburn received industrial development grants for three projects:

Arkal Automotive USA, Pyongsan America, Inc. and CNJ, Inc. will all receive over \$265,000 combined for expansions and related manufacturing equipment that serves the automotive industry.

These three projects total more than a \$30 million capital investment with the creation of 167 new jobs.

"What we're seeing in our economy is we're having a lot of expansions. We recruited a lot of companies years ago and when you bring them in they have an opportunity for more business, they create new jobs on an ongoing bases so you build in your expansion when you recruit the project to the community," says Dunlap.

"Whenever you can turn \$265,000 into over million dollars, that's a pretty good return," explains Hubbard. "I believe that what we're supposed to do here in Montgomery and that is to provide assistance to local and private industry more importantly to encourage them to grow and prosper."

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Speaker Hubbard secures more than \$265,000 in industrial development grants for Auburn

Auburn Villager

February 19, 2014

Alabama House Speaker Mike Hubbard (R-Auburn) announced today three industrial development grants from the State Industrial Development Authority for

projects in Auburn.

"My main focus as the State Representative for House District 79 has been creating jobs, recruiting industry, and growing the economy," said Hubbard. "Auburn is blessed to have incredible leadership on all levels of government and working together we will continue to have great success in attracting new industries and expanding existing ones. The selection of three Auburn projects proves that our efforts are working and are recognized across the state."

The Industrial Development Grant funds are provided to the Grantee for use in preparation of a Project Site for qualifying projects that are a new facility, rehabilitation of an existing facility or an expansion of an existing facility. The Industrial Development Board of the City of Auburn received industrial development grants for three projects:

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House General Fund budget: More money for Medicaid; level-funding for other agencies; \$1.8 billion budget closely resembles Gov. Robert Bentley's proposal

Montgomery Advertiser

February 18, 2014

Brian Lyman and Kala Kachmar

A look at some of the highlights of the General Fund budget, approved by a House committee Wednesday. The budget, which could be taken up by the House next week, closely follows proposals made by Gov. Robert Bentley.

- Medicaid: Would receive \$685 million, an increase of \$70 million over the current year. Dr. Don Williamson, overseeing an overhaul of the program, said that would be enough to restore reimbursement cuts to certain specialists.
- Corrections: Would receive \$389 million. With expected carryover, the Department would essentially be level-funded for the year. However, budget committee chairs have said Corrections may get more money.
- Courts: Would receive \$92.3 million, an increase of about \$3.1 million over the current year. Chief Justice Roy Moore had requested significantly more, noting that his budget is lower than it was in 2002.
- Forensic Sciences: Would receive \$500,000 boost.
- Public Health: Would receive \$103,000 more, mostly to pay for increases in breast and cervical cancer detection and dialysis patient transportation.

The House's Ways and Means General Fund committee Wednesday approved a \$1.8 billion General Fund budget for fiscal year 2015 that provides more money for Medicaid, level funds other state agencies and makes a cost-of-living increase for state employees unlikely.

The budget proposal closely follows Gov. Robert Bentley's budget from January. However, the document -- which now goes to the full House for consideration -- will still be a work in progress for lawmakers, particularly when it comes to funding for the Department of Corrections.

DOC came out of the House committee essentially level-funded, but both House Ways and Means General Fund chair Steve Clouse, R-Ozark and Senate Finance and Taxation General Fund chairman Arthur Orr, R-Decatur, have said they want to find more money for the department, facing severe overcrowding and understaffing issues.

Clouse said Wednesday lawmakers are continuing to meet with DOC Commissioner Kim Thomas on the department's needs. The U.S. Department of Justice is conducting an investigation of Julia Tutwiler Prison for Women in Wetumpka, saying in a letter to Thomas last month that Alabama was violating Tutwiler inmates' Eighth Amendment protection against cruel and unusual punishment "by failing to protect women prisoners at Tutwiler from harm due to sexual abuse and harassment from correctional staff."

"We continue to meet with (Thomas) on the demands he's getting from the federal government, and what we need to do with the prison situation," Clouse said after the meeting. "That (number) may very well change as we move forward in the process."

An attempt to reach Thomas for comment was unsuccessful Wednesday afternoon. The commissioner told the Advertiser last week that he had met with the budget chairs, but was not privy to their funding discussions.

Medicaid, the largest single component in the budget, would get about \$685 million in the budget proposal, an increase of about \$70 million over its current state funding level. The agency had requested \$700 million, but Dr. Don Williamson, who is overseeing efforts to overhaul delivery of Medicaid services, said Medicaid could make the budget work through some cost-cutting measures, such as looking at new ways to purchase pharmaceuticals.

“We’ll start broke and we’ll end up broke,” he said. “But we’ll pay all our bills in the process.”

However, Williamson said the \$685 million does not cover other contingencies, such as an ongoing dispute with the Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services over enrollment of children in the program, which could cost the agency tens of millions of dollars.

Alabama Medicaid has some of the strictest enrollment requirements in the country. Childless adults are almost never eligible, and parents of children can only qualify if their income is 11 to 13 percent of the poverty level. Despite that, the program covers about 20 percent of the state’s population, and pays for more than half of the live births. The federal government picks up more than two-thirds of the costs of running the program.

Like Bentley’s budget, the House version includes a conditional appropriation of \$22 million to help fund a four percent state employee pay raise. However, that raise would only come if money becomes available, and lawmakers are pessimistic that any additional funds will come into the perpetually cash-strapped budget.

Rep. John Knight, D-Montgomery, said he wanted the conditional pay raise to be the first priority if the money became available. He said Bentley made a commitment to conditional pay raises in his state of the state address last month.

Several committee members said they agree the pay raises are important, but don’t want to bind themselves in case an appropriation needs to be made to another department or agency -- such as Corrections or Medicaid -- later.

“We’re not adding anything to the prisons here, but we may have to as the session goes on and we get more information,” Clouse said.

“Many of us feel we want to release this as the first conditional,” said Rep. Charles Newton, R-Greenville. “But to tie our hands today doesn’t seem prudent.”

The committee voted against Knight’s amendment to make the pay raises a conditional first priority.

The General Fund budget gets most of its revenues from three dozen sources, most of which post flat growth year-to-year. The Legislative Fiscal Office projected in January that revenues in the General Fund would be down by about \$83 million; lawmakers have made up the difference by seeking money from other areas, such as unclaimed property and the business license tax.

Clouse said they were “comfortable” with those projections.

The Attorney General’s office did not receive any money in the General Fund budget. In a statement, Attorney General Luther Strange said he hoped “it was a mistake.”

“Given everything my office is working on across the State, like defending laws passed by the Legislature and prosecuting the BP oil spill case, it’s troubling not to receive guaranteed funding for the office,” the statement said.

The House could take up the budget next week.

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Slightly higher '15 budget suggested

Decatur Daily

February 18, 2014

Mary Sell

MONTGOMERY — The chairman of the House General Fund Budget Committee said he's suggesting a 2015 budget that is slightly larger than what the governor has recommended.

"We're going to have some additions in some areas where there were additional needs," Rep. Steve Clouse, R-Ozark, said Tuesday.

Clouse declined to say where those increases are until the meeting today. The committee isn't going to suggest any additional cuts to any agencies, he said.

The General Fund supports most non-education state functions, including corrections, Medicaid and state law enforcement. Gov. Robert Bentley is suggesting an \$1.8 billion budget for the fiscal year that starts in October.

Clouse said Bentley's \$70 million increase for Medicaid will stay in the House version of the budget, giving the agency \$685 million. Medicaid is the largest general fund expenditure.

"Medicaid comes first and foremost; it is the cornerstone," Clouse said. "We have to get that 2-to-1 (federal) match to keep everything flowing."

Rep. Lynn Greer, R-Rogersville, is on the budget committee.

"I think the changes will be minor, not a lot of modifications from what the governor had," Greer said Monday. "It's a tight money situation. We can only spend what we've got and move forward."

Income from the General Fund's multiple revenue sources has largely remained flat in recent years, while demands on the budget have not.

If the budget is voted out of committee today, it will likely be voted on in the full House next week. From there, it goes to the Senate.

Meanwhile, the proposed Education Budget will likely be in a Senate committee next week. Sen. Trip Pittman, R-Daphne, said a version in the Education Budget Committee will likely be less

than what the governor suggested. He declined Tuesday to talk about specific dollar amounts or cuts.

Bentley's Education Budget is nearly \$6 billion. K-12 schools would get a 4-percent increase, two-year schools 3 percent more and universities 1 percent more.

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Alabama House committee holds hearing on fetal heartbeat bill that would ban most abortions

The Associated Press

February 18, 2014

MONTGOMERY, Alabama — Alabama lawmakers are considering a stringent abortion ban that would largely forbid the procedure once a fetal heartbeat can be detected, something that can happen as early as six weeks into a pregnancy.

"If your heart is beating, that is an indication that you are alive. Let's just protect those unborn, alive children," bill sponsor Rep. Mary Sue McClurkin, R-Indian Springs, told a legislative committee.

Alabama is the latest state to consider tough restrictions, as abortion opponents seek to make a dent in the Supreme Court's 1973 *Roe v. Wade* ruling that legalized abortion. North Dakota approved a similar heartbeat bill last year, but a federal judge put the law on hold while the legal fight plays out in court. Proponents of the McClurkin's bill said it would protect the unborn, while opponents called it blatantly unconstitutional and destined to be enjoined by the courts.

The two sides squared off in a public hearing Wednesday before the House Health Committee.

JoAnn Cummings of Decatur said the proposal would ban almost all abortions in Alabama.

"You know with the right equipment the fetal heartbeat can be heard as early as six weeks, often before the woman even knows she is pregnant," Cummings said.

The National Institutes of Health's website for patients says a heartbeat can be heard at six to seven weeks. A fetal heartbeat can generally be detected earliest using a vaginal ultrasound, although McClurkin's bill does not specify a method for detection.

"If safe, legal abortions are not available, and women and girls do not view them as a possibility, we do return to the rusty knives and coat hangers and things that many of us can remember," retired law professor Martha Morgan told committee members.

Unlike past debates over clinic regulations and more incremental restrictions, this debate was directly aimed over whether abortion should be legal.

"You are protecting the lives of people who are going to provide to society benefits and blessings that would be missed otherwise," said Joe Godfrey, executive director of the Alabama Citizens Action Program.

McClurkin agreed that the bill would ban most abortions in the state.

A. Eric Johnston, president of the Alabama Prolife Coalition, said some abortion opponents want to use heartbeat laws as a test case with the U.S. Supreme Court in the hopes of getting the court to revisit *Roe v. Wade*. Although, Johnston, who helped write the bill, said he thought they faced long odds to get before the high court.

"If there's a small possibility, then it may be worthwhile," Johnston said.

Three other bills seek to put new limits on abortion.

Current Alabama law requires women to receive information about abortion alternatives and possible adverse outcomes 24 hours before scheduling an abortion. One of the Alabama proposals would increase the waiting period to 48 hours.

Bill sponsor Rep. Ed Henry, R-Decatur, said it would give a woman more time "to make the decision that she will carry for the rest of her life."

"I believe there are a lot of people out there who aren't aware of alternatives," Henry said.

Susan Watson, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Alabama, called the proposal an attempt to shame a woman into changing her mind about having an abortion.

"These bills imply that we are stupid. That we don't understand and we can't make informed, mature decisions regarding our own bodies. That we need politicians to coddle us and say, 'Now honey, are you sure?'" Watson said.

A third bill would require women seeking an abortion because of lethal fetal anomalies to be advised of the availability of perinatal hospice services. A fourth bill would require parents to submit a birth certificate, or other proof of parenthood, when giving consent for their daughter to have an abortion.

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Lawmakers, activists debate abortion bills

Anniston Star

February 19, 2014

Tim Lockette

MONTGOMERY -- Lawmakers and activists held a wide-ranging discussion on abortion at the Alabama State House Wednesday, and their arguments sometimes came down to whether a heartbeat is the same thing as a viable life.

"We would not turn off the machine on someone who had a heartbeat," said Rep. Mary Sue McClurkin, R-Indian Springs, sponsor of a bill that would ban abortions when a doctor can detect a heartbeat in a fetus.

McClurkin's bill was one of four bills, all imposing new restrictions on abortion, that came before the House Health Committee in a public hearing Wednesday. Along with McClurkin's bill, House members discussed bills that would impose a 48-hour wait on women seeking an abortion and establish tougher rules on parental consent for minors seeking an abortion. They also discussed a bill that would require abortion doctors to provide information about hospice care for newborns when a woman is considering an abortion because a fetus has a fatal defect.

Abortion rights advocates said all four bills amounted to an attack on a woman's right to have an abortion.

"These bills are not about health care," said Susan Watson, director of the ACLU of Alabama. "These are bullying tactics that are meant to shame a woman into changing her mind."

Of the four bills, McClurkin's would likely be the most restrictive. Both sides said the measure would ban most abortions in the state. According to the National Institutes of Health, the heart begins to beat on a regular rhythm at six to seven weeks of gestation.

Joe Godfrey, director of the anti-abortion group ALCAP, said a heartbeat is one of the first signs of life a first responder looks for when treating an injured patient. Godfrey said the bill would protect people such as his two adopted daughters, who he described as "potential victims of abortion."

"You're protecting the lives of people who are going to provide society with benefits and blessings," he said.

Retired University of Alabama law professor Martha Monroe said the heartbeat bill was "blatantly unconstitutional." Courts, she said, have historically allowed abortion up to the age at which a fetus is viable outside the womb -- weeks after the heartbeat is audible.

"The court says abortion can't be prohibited prior to viability and this clearly does that," she said.

McClurkin's bill would require doctors to check for a heartbeat, and would make providing an abortion, when a heartbeat is audible, a felony punishable by up to 10 years in prison. Abortion providers would be required to make a record of the test.

Committee member Rep. Joe Hubbard, D-Montgomery, questioned whether doctors would be able to keep those records to the state's satisfaction. Rep. Ed Henry, R-Decatur, a medical technician, said those records are normally kept when a sonogram is performed.

Henry was a sponsor of one of the abortion bills, which would require that women seeking abortions be provided with information about other options 48 hours before a procedure. The bill would effectively double the current 24-hour waiting period.

"It would provide a woman with a little more time before making what would be a life-changing decision," he said.

Montgomery resident Pat Harris said women have already given thought to the decision before they walk through the doors of a clinic.

"Women can make their own decisions," she said. "They don't need the Legislature to come and tell them they need to wait another day."

Legislative committees typically don't vote on bills immediately after a public hearing, and no vote was held on the abortion bills Wednesday. The bills must pass out of the committee to go to the full House for a vote.

Abortion rights opponents in the audience urged lawmakers to pass all four bills. Hunter Mills, a student at Troy University, told lawmakers he was an adopted child who "would not be standing here" if his birth mother had decided to opt for abortion.

"It's time to implement a major change," Mills said.

Abortion rights advocates said the bills, if passed, would likely bog the state down in costly litigation. They said women should be able to make a decision on abortion on their own.

"I guess what I'm saying is, it's none of your business," Harris said. "Leave us alone."

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Abortion is hot topic at capital

Times Daily

February 19, 2014

Mary Sell

MONTGOMERY — A committee of lawmakers in the Alabama House heard alternating arguments Wednesday about reducing abortions in Alabama and staying out of women's choices.

Four bills that would put new regulations on what must be done before abortions can be performed were discussed in public hearings in the House Health Committee, drawing emotional responses from both sides.

The bills would:

- Change from 24 to 48 the number of hours a woman must wait between consultation and abortion;

- Ban abortion if a fetal heartbeat can be heard. Medical experts say that can be as early as eight weeks. Current law bans abortion after 20 weeks. At least two other states have passed similar laws, and both have been challenged in court;
- Require physicians to provide to women whose fetuses aren't likely to survive to birth or long after it information about hospice services available if she carries to term. If abortion providers don't provide the information, they can be charged criminally;
- Put more requirements on minors seeking abortions, including making a consenting parent prove they are the minor's mother or father.
- About the 48-hour wait bill, sponsored by Rep. Ed Henry, R-Hartselle, Montgomery resident Pat Harris said women can make their own choices without lawmakers telling them how long to think about it.

“They don't need the Legislature to come in and tell them they need to wait another day,” Harris said. “You're just making it more painful.

“I guess what I'm saying is, it's none of your business, leave us alone.”

Henry, who is a member of the committee, said an additional 24 hours would make some women reconsider.

“We hear a lot of people say, women already know, but I have to disagree.” Henry said. “I think there are a lot of women who don't know the alternatives or the consequences (of abortion).”

Henry in 2012 said when he was younger, he went with his girlfriend to have an abortion.

Opponents of the bills said they're designed to restrict abortion in the state.

“You need to get out of our bedrooms and leave these decisions where they belong: between a woman, her partner, her physician and her God,” said JoAnne Cummings, a Decatur resident.

Others supported the bills and said the state should be doing more to encourage adoption.

“Every person has the right to life and we need to preserve that right,” said 18-year-old Hunter Mills, who told a House Committee his teenage birth mother opted to give him up for adoption rather than have an abortion.

Rep. Mary Sue McClurkin's bill to ban abortion if there is a detectable heartbeat is probably the most controversial of the four bills because it drastically reduces the amount of time a woman has to have an abortion. Earlier this week, McClurkin said she hopes her bill will reduce the number of abortions in the state.

Opponents said the bill will lead to lawsuits, as it has in other states.

Later, Henry said that shouldn't be a concern for lawmakers.

“We cannot let the potential for lawsuits keep us from doing the right thing,” he said. “And protecting the life of an unborn child is the right thing to do.”

The committee didn’t vote on the bills Wednesday, and chairman Rep. Jim McClendon, R-Springville, said he didn’t know when it might.

Rep. Ken Johnson, R-Moulton, is a committee member. He said he will vote in favor of all four bills, as will Henry.

One of the few Democrats on the committee, Rep. Joe Hubbard, of Montgomery, is pro-life.

“But at the end of the day, there are circumstances where there needs to be that option (for abortion) and where that option needs to be available, it needs to be safe, it needs to be legal, but it also needs to be rare,” Hubbard said. “The problem I have with a lot of these bills is that they’re concocted in the four corners of the country. These aren’t bills that are coming up out of needs or issues here in Alabama.”

Others argued that if lawmakers wanted to stop abortion in the state, they would work to make birth control more easily available.

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Tracking the 2014 session: Wednesday's action in the Alabama Legislature

The Associated Press

February 19, 2014

MONTGOMERY, Alabama — A summary of action in the Alabama Legislature on Wednesday, a committee meeting day:

COMMITTEES:

—Senate Finance and Taxation-Education Committee held a public hearing on a bill to phase out the state sales tax on groceries, but did not vote.

—Senate Judiciary Committee approved a bill to keep the manufacturers and suppliers of drugs for lethal injections private. Goes to Senate.

—House Ways and Means Committee approved a \$1.8 billion General Fund for the 2015 fiscal year. Goes to House.

—House Health Committee held a public hearing on a bill that would ban abortion after the fetal heartbeat is detected, but did not vote.

AGENDA:

—House meets at 9 a.m. Thursday. The Senate meets at 10 a.m.

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State House committee examines proposed expansion, restrictions for Birmingham Water Works Board

Al.com

February 19, 2014

Joseph D. Bryant

MONTGOMERY, Alabama -- A bill in the Alabama House of Representatives that would expand the Birmingham Water Works Board and put area counties in a leadership majority was discussed in a committee today.

The House Health Committee held the first hearing on the proposal from Rep. Jim McClendon, R-St. Clair County. An endorsement vote by the committee is expected next week. If approved, the bill would progress to a vote by the full House.

McClendon is also the committee chairman. He has said the ultimate goal of the bill is to get five new members on the expanded Water Works Board who would then agree to sell the Moody water system back to the city of Moody.

The St. Clair board member would then exit the board. The Birmingham Water Works bought the Moody system in 1992.

Moody City Attorney James Hill III, spoke on behalf of bill supporters today.

"The city of Moody and those citizens do not have a voice on that board," Hill told AL.com in an interview. "Rates, debt service, are both management and financial issues that our citizens are directly affected by, but they have no representation when those decisions are made."

Hill, who is also the St. Clair County attorney, said the Moody and St. Clair delegation is united behind McClendon's proposal.

"The county's position is they support their cities and this is a significant issue for one of their cities," Hill said. "Jefferson County is not an island, the city of Birmingham is not an island and the decisions they make have an immediate impact on St. Clair County."

St. Clair Commissioner Paul Manning was also at the State House in support of the bill. After the hearing Manning stressed that the bill would benefit St. Clair County by providing a needed voice for water customers there.

"We're all in this to make a better county, be more responsive to the people and are looking forward to progress at the end of the day," he said

The McClendon bill is similar to other pending bills from State Sen. Jabo Waggoner R-Vestavia Hills , Paul DeMarco R-Homewood and David Standridge R-Blount County.

In all, there are four bills in the Legislature that would expand the Water Works Board and impose restrictions on board terms and compensation.

Supporters from both St. Clair County and Blount County spoke in favor of the legislation today including Blount County Commissioner Allen Armstrong.

Under the bill, Jefferson County, Shelby, Blount, St. Clair and Walker counties would be added to the board. If approved, the nine-member board would be comprised of five from outside the city and just four from Birmingham.

McClendon's ultimate call for independence from the Birmingham Water Works comes at the same the board members mull possibly divesting all customers outside Jefferson County in an attempt to kill proposals to expand the board.

A preliminary Water Works Board study on selling off outside water systems and ending non-Jefferson County service is expected Thursday.

Nevertheless, McClendon and bill supporters said immediate overtures to sell the Moody system back to the city of Moody would not stop efforts to gain a Birmingham board seat. Those officials want more than a promise to sell, saying St. Clair County would only leave the Birmingham Water Works board when a transfer of assets is completed.

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Department of Justice puts all states on notice: Prisons' sex abuse cases could threaten federal funding

Montgomery Advertiser

February 20, 2014

Kala Kachmar

The state of Alabama could lose federal grant funding for prisons if it doesn't certify that it's in compliance with federal prison rape elimination standards.

The U.S. Department of Justice sent a letter to all state governors last week asking each to certify that they are in full compliance with the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA), or submit an assurance that they'll use a portion of the grant funds solely for the purpose of achieving that compliance.

If states don't respond by May 15, they'll lose 5 percent of federal grant money in the current fiscal year. The Alabama Department of Corrections received \$44,393,510 from miscellaneous revenue sources and the federal government this year, according to budget data.

"I applaud the Justice Department for creating financial consequences," said Bryan Stevenson, executive director of the Montgomery-based nonprofit legal firm Equal Justice Initiative, which

has released several reports about sexual assault and violence at Alabama facilities. “The bill was passed with almost unanimous support.

“The entire federal government is putting all their weight behind getting rid of this dreadful phenomenon.”

Last month, the DOJ’s Special Litigation Section of the Human Rights Division released a 34-page report detailing what it called systemic problems at the Julia Tutwiler Prison for Women in Wetumpka that have allowed its staff to continue to sexually abuse and harass inmates.

A letter to Gov. Robert Bentley from the DOJ said the conditions at Tutwiler were unconstitutional, and that it would expand its investigation of the facility.

The letter said that inmates at Tutwiler “universally fear for their safety ... live in a sexualized environment with repeated and open sexual behavior,” including abusive actions and language. It also said they were subjected to a staff member-condoned “strip show” and “deliberate cross-gender viewing” of inmates as they bathed and used bathrooms.

According to the report, there were also “serious discrepancies” between the information maintained in Tutwiler’s incident report log related to allegations of sexual misconduct and the sexual abuse log maintained by the ADOC’s PREA coordinator, including missing reports, reports listed as pending for long periods of time and no clear indication of whether action had been taken.

“As we’ve seen in Tutwiler, Elmore and Donaldson, not only is sexual violence from other prisoners a problem, but it’s directed at prisoners from officers, too,” Stevenson said.

Reports of the conditions have state leaders concerned about the potential threat of lawsuits that could lead to federal intervention.

Jennifer Ardis, a spokeswoman for Bentley, said Alabama has been working to implement PREA since before it was officially adopted in 2012.

“Prison rape abuse is unacceptable, and we are taking appropriate steps to make Alabama facilities safer for inmates, staff and the public,” Ardis said. “We will continue to review the DOJ letter, and we will respond by the May 15 deadline.”

Prison Commissioner Kim Thomas could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

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Anatomy of the deal: Why Remington chose Huntsville for \$110M firearms plant

Al.com

February 18, 2014

Steve Doyle

HUNTSVILLE, Alabama – After a long day touring the former Chrysler electronics plant near Huntsville International Airport and getting a crash course on the area's public schools, universities and community colleges, Remington Outdoor CEO George Kollitides and other top company executives went to dinner at Cotton Row.

They were joined on that chilly early December night by Huntsville Mayor Tommy Battle, Madison County Commission Chairman Dale Strong, Chamber of Commerce leaders and Shane Davis, the city's point man on industrial recruitment efforts.

Gov. Robert Bentley and Alabama Commerce Secretary Greg Canfield were also there, having flown in unannounced to see where Huntsville stood on Remington's short list after the crucial site visit.

The Alabama Department of Commerce had been notified just before Thanksgiving that the Rocket City was a finalist for a \$110 million Remington gun plant that would create up to 2,000 advanced manufacturing jobs. But impressions formed by company executives on their first trip to Huntsville would be a deciding factor.

Turns out Kollitides and his team were sufficiently impressed.

'Every nook and cranny'

"They checked every nook and cranny of that (Chrysler) building," Strong recalled Monday. "You could see how excited they were about this opportunity to grow their company."

Dale Strong mug.jpg

[View full size](#)

Madison County Commission Chairman Dale Strong. (Sarah Cole | scole@al.com)

As the dinner party left Cotton Row, handshakes were exchanged on the historic Courthouse Square. Strong said he felt at that point that Huntsville would be Remington's choice.

"We started the process to finish the deal," he said. "We put the full-court press on. There was no relenting; we were committed to bringing them here."

That perseverance paid just after 2 p.m. Monday, when Kollitides confirmed word that began leaking over the weekend that Remington will turn the sprawling former Chrysler plant at the corner of Wall-Triana Highway and Electronics Boulevard into the company's third U.S. firearms factory.

The plant is expected to open in 2015 with 280 employees and reach full production in 2021. Remington's development deal with Huntsville guarantees the company will create a minimum of 1,868 new jobs at an average annual salary of \$42,000.

Project Traveler

Davis, the city's urban development director, said he first heard about "Project Traveler" – the code name for the Remington factory search – in August 2013 from M.R. Press Consulting, an industrial site selection firm from Connecticut.

At that point, cities and states across the U.S. were being invited to submit proposals for an unnamed advanced manufacturing company that would bring about 2,000 new jobs to the winning community. Information from M.R. Press indicated the company would initially need 300,000 to 400,000 square feet of manufacturing space, and perhaps much more in the future.

Davis said the empty Chrysler building – with 843,000 square feet of manufacturing space, 145 acres for future growth and 2,000 employee parking spaces – jumped quickly to mind.

"I knew that facility very well, and it just seemed like a perfect match," Davis told AL.com Thursday.

The Alabama Department of Commerce ultimately submitted nine sites, including the Chrysler plant, as potential homes for Project Traveler. Twenty-three other states also made bids.

About a month went by before Davis heard back from M.R. Press: Huntsville had made the first cut. It was September; Remington's name had still not come up.

The art of the deal

"At that point, we kind of went into the mode of how our project, if selected, would work," he said. "Kind of the terms of what our community could offer."

Huntsville Urban Development Director Shane Davis.jpg

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Huntsville Urban Development Director Shane Davis. (File photo)

Davis said the city's negotiating team, which had signed non-disclosure agreements promising not to say anything publicly about Project Traveler, put together a package of information highlighting North Alabama's skilled labor pool, quality of life features and good public schools, community colleges and universities.

"If you don't have the workforce," said Davis, "the building doesn't do them any good. We've got a lot of advanced manufacturing and have been able to replenish that labor pool."

The city provided examples of other advanced manufacturers that are thriving in the Huntsville area: Toyota, Adtran, Navistar, Raytheon, Teledyne Brown, Carpenter Technology in Limestone County.

Huntsville learned it was a finalist for the project in early November. Just before Thanksgiving, the site selection firm revealed that Project Traveler was North Carolina-based Remington Outdoor Co.

Davis was thrilled to now be courting America's oldest gun maker. He said one of his most prized possessions is the Remington Model 1100 .12-gauge shotgun he received as a Christmas present at age 12.

"I was just very excited," said Davis. "Being an avid outdoorsman myself, it just made you work a little harder through the holidays."

Chaotic time

The all-important December site visit by Kollitides and other Remington executives came at a chaotic time. Huntsville was also courting Boeing, which was hunting for a site to build its next-generation 777X jetliner after the machinists union rejected the company's initial offer to perform the work in Washington state. The Rocket City was rumored to be high on Boeing's list.

Like Strong, Davis said it became obvious during the Chrysler plant tour that the Remington leaders liked the property.

"They really fell in love with the facility and felt it could meet their immediate needs and future needs," he said. "But there was still work to do. At that point, we still didn't know who we were competing against."

Davis said the city took the non-disclosure agreement seriously, meeting behind closed doors in small groups to avoid raising suspicion. In addition to Battle and Strong, the negotiating team included Huntsville Economic Development Director Michelle Jordan; Chamber of Commerce CEO Chip Cherry; Limestone County Economic Development Association President Tom Hill; Tate Godfrey, president and CEO of the Decatur-based North Alabama Industrial Development Association; Jetplex Industrial Park Director Brooks Kracke; and Richard Knox, Huntsville Utilities' engineering service superintendent.

The city-owned utility will be responsible to meeting Remington's considerable power needs at the new Huntsville plant.

Strong said Remington has had its architects and facilities team inside the Chrysler building for about two months, giving the company a head start on retrofitting the site to meet its needs. At full production, he said, Remington will be Madison County's third-largest private employer behind Boeing and SAIC. Adtran also employs about 2,000 people in Huntsville.

"People were wanting more to be done on economic development, and I believe we've answered the call," said Strong.

"There will be nothing greater than seeing employees coming in and out of that Remington plant on multiple shifts, producing the world's finest firearms right here in Madison County."

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Auto supplier announces 200 new jobs for southeast Alabama

Al.com

February 20, 2014

Dawn Kent Azok

ENTERPRISE, Alabama -- HS Automotive Alabama, which recently completed a 100-job expansion, will add another 200 jobs to its Enterprise operations.

The auto supplier's announcement came Wednesday during a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the expansion that was announced last year, an event that drew Gov. Robert Bentley and others. The move was driven by the addition of new product lines, according to Jonathan Tullos, executive director of the Wiregrass Economic Development Corp.

"We're thrilled," he said. "We think the Wiregrass has some of the best workers in the nation. It's another opportunity for people to have jobs who maybe lost them during the recession and the sequestration at Fort Rucker."

HSAA is a Korean company that produces weather stripping, tubing and automotive pressure hoses for automakers including Hyundai, Kia, Chrysler and General Motors.

The company, which arrived in Enterprise in 2003, now employs close to 300 people there. Hiring is underway for the 100 new jobs announced last year and the 200 announced today, Tullos said.

The new jobs will bring HSAA's total employment in the region to about 600.

The 100-job expansion involved a \$20 million investment and the construction of a 117,000-square-foot building, he said. Those numbers were originally pegged at \$12 million and 65,000 square feet, but the estimates grew.

Incentives for that project included statutory property tax abatements, excluding school taxes, as well as sales and use tax abatements on construction materials. There were no discretionary incentives.

The expansion announced Wednesday will involve a 50,000-square-foot expansion to the new building, as HSAA increases its brake hose and tubing operations and robotics division, Tullos said.

The original tax abatements will carry over to this project. In addition, Bentley offered a \$300,000 economic development grant to be paid as the 200 jobs are created, according to the Alabama Department of Commerce.

Read more state auto industry news in this week's Driving Alabama.

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Alabama Attorney General Luther Strange not happy with being zeroed out of General Fund

The Associated Press

February 19, 2014

MONTGOMERY, Alabama — Alabama Attorney General Luther Strange says he is concerned about what lawmakers' proposed General Fund budget will mean for his office.

The House Ways and Means General Fund Committee on Wednesday approved a budget that zeroes out the office's current \$7 million appropriation. The budget bill says the office should instead use \$7 million from the national settlement with five big mortgage companies.

Strange says it is troubling that lawmakers would not guarantee full funding for the office that prosecutes criminals and is trying the BP oil spill case.

Gov. Robert Bentley had first made the budget proposal.

A Bentley spokeswoman says if the office does not have the money needed in 2015, that the governor will work with Strange to address the shortfall.

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Twenty-two years and counting: Alabama lawmakers hear another proposal to remove state sales tax on food

The Associated Press

February 19, 2014

MONTGOMERY, Alabama — For the 22nd year, Alabama legislators are discussing removing the state sales tax on groceries and replacing the lost revenue with another source.

The Senate Finance and Taxation-Education Committee held a public hearing Wednesday on a bill that would phase out the state's 4 percent sales tax on groceries. It would increase the sales tax on other purchases to 5 percent to make up the lost revenue.

Dial said he and others have been introducing bills every year since 1992 to address the sales tax on groceries and have never had anything enacted. "This is Groundhog Day," he said, referring to the Bill Murray movie where the weatherman repeats the same day over and over.

The leader of a group that represents Alabama's poor said low-income Alabamians would end up paying about the same under Dial's bill because they would have to pay more to buy clothes, detergent and other basic household items that would have a 5 percent state tax.

"We are replacing one regressive tax with another regressive tax," Kimble Forrister, executive director of Alabama Arise, said.

Forrister's group prefers a bill introduced in the House by Democratic Rep. John Knight of Montgomery. It would repeal the sale tax on groceries and replace the revenue by removing Alabama's state income tax deduction for federal income taxes paid. That would save money for lower-income Alabamians and require higher-income citizens to pay more. Knight's bill is awaiting consideration in a House committee.

Opponents of Knight's plan pointed out that he couldn't get it passed when his fellow Democrats controlled the Legislature prior to 2010 and his chances are worse now that Republicans control the Legislature.

Dial said legislators from both parties are reluctant to raise taxes on one group. "That is just not going to happen in this Legislature," he said.

Dial also said repealing the grocery tax and not replacing the revenue is not an option because sales taxes support public education and eliminating the grocery tax would cut public education funding by \$370 million annually.

Dial said he's hopeful of getting the committee to approve his bill next week and send it to the Senate. He got an identical bill through the committee last year and then saw it die in the Senate.

Alabama and Mississippi are the only Southern states that levy their total state sales tax on groceries. All other Southern states either have no tax or a reduced tax.

"I am hopeful I will live to see the day when we remove the tax on groceries like Georgia," Forrister said.

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Democrat Griffith kicks off campaign for governor

The Associated Press

February 19, 2014

Phillip Rawls

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — Former U.S. Rep. Parker Griffith kicked off his Democratic campaign for governor Wednesday by calling Republican incumbent Robert Bentley timid and advocating expansion of the state Medicaid program under the federal health care law.

The former congressman from Huntsville said he would also campaign on legalizing a state lottery to pay for scholarships.

"We know we can create more jobs when we have a healthy, well-educated workforce," Griffith said.

Griffith outlined his campaign agenda of jobs, education and health care in a letter posted on his new campaign website Wednesday. In interviews and in a letter to voters posted on his website, Griffith called Republican incumbent Robert Bentley timid for not expanding Medicaid.

"Alabama wasn't built by timid politicians like Robert Bentley," Griffith said.

In seeking re-election, Bentley points out that Alabama's 6.1 percent unemployment rate is the lowest in five years and there are 59,400 more jobs now than when he took office in January 2011.

Griffith said Alabama's job creation is low compared to many states and the decline in unemployment is due in part to workers 55 and older losing their jobs and giving up on finding replacements, which means they are no longer counted as unemployed.

Griffith signed up to run for governor only a few minutes before the Feb. 7 deadline for major party candidates declare their candidacies. He said he needed a few days to pull his campaign together and that's why he had the kickoff Wednesday.

Griffith and Bentley are both 71 and both physicians. Bentley refused to expand the Medicaid program under the federal health care law because he said he said the program was broken and unaffordable. Griffith voted against the Affordable Care Act in Congress because he said he didn't like parts of it and other parts were confusing. But he said Tuesday he always liked the Medicaid expansion in the law and believes it would create 30,000 health care jobs in Alabama.

Griffith accused Bentley of making the Medicaid decision based on politics instead of what's in best for his constituents.

"He's timid in the sense he's a captive of the extremists in his party," Griffith said.

Bentley's campaign had no immediate comment on Griffith's remarks.

Griffith faces Fayette businessman Kevin Bass in the Democratic primary June 3. Bentley faces two opponents in the GOP primary the same day.

Griffith was elected to the Alabama Senate in 2004 and then to Congress in 2008 as a Democrat, but switched parties in December 2009 ahead of a national Republican wave. He lost the Republican primary in 2010 to Mo Brooks, a tea party favorite who beat Griffith again in the 2012 primary. Then he became an independent and recently rejoined the Democratic Party to run for governor.

Griffith said he originally left the Democratic Party because national leaders of the Democratic Party were far to the left of the Democrats he served with in the Alabama Legislature. He said he didn't get along with national leaders of the Republican Party either and decided to re-enter state politics as a Democrat. "I'm wiser for the experience," he said.

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Candidate hoping to be 'gun-toting governor' says lottery would eliminate state incentives like Remington's \$54 million

Al.com

February 19, 2014

Kelly Kazek

MORGAN COUNTY, Alabama - Stacy Lee George, a corrections officer and former Morgan County Commissioner running for election as the "gun-toting governor" of Alabama, said implementing a lottery would eliminate the need for the state to provide \$54.5 million in incentives to companies like Remington Arms.

George, a Republican, held a press conference today in Union Grove in response to Monday's announcement that the gun manufacturer would soon locate in Huntsville, eventually bringing 2,000 jobs to north Alabama.

"This is an excellent opportunity for Alabama but we spent nearly \$70 million (including \$14.5 million in contributions from local governments) to get them here," George said in an interview after the press conference. "If we could put the lottery in place, we could improve education, start the Ready to Work program, and improve the quality of life--issues companies look at when they want to expand."

George estimates a lottery would bring from \$200 to \$250 million to the state, a conservative number. Those funds would improve the state's marketability, he said, "so next time we may not have to give the (funding) incentives."

Alabama is bordered on all sides by states with lotteries or gambling, he said. Tennessee's lottery generates \$330 million annually, while Georgia generates \$900 million and Florida more than \$1 billion. Mississippi's casinos generate an unknown amount of revenue, George said.

A state-run lottery would keep money in Alabama.

"Jobs are good but that won't start until 18 months from the time the building is renovated and will create jobs over 10 years," George said of Remington's plan.

Using lottery funds, he wants to focus on improving Alabama's ranking in education, as well as add fire departments and promote downtown revitalization, he said.

"Every child should be able to read and write by the time they're in fourth grade," he said.

George said in a poll his campaign conducted in five north Alabama counties, 62 percent of people favor a lottery.

'Gun-toting governor'

George said one reason Remington chose to locate here is because southerners typically support Second Amendment rights. George, who has been an officer at Limestone Correctional Facility for five years, said he wears his gun to send a message.

"I'm not wearing a gun for self-protection," he said. "I'm protecting the Second Amendment. If Alabama is known for having a gun-toting governor, people know Alabama supports Second Amendment rights. It sends a message to the President of the United States that if you can't take the governor's gun, you can't take the people's guns either."

George, who served two terms on the Morgan County Commission, said he previously worked for the Department of Defense at AMTEC Corp., Wylie Labs in Madison and as a pipeline inspector at nuclear power plants.