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FULL TEXT

Alabama House responds to IRS controversy; Proposal would bar officials from conducting 'political' audits

The Associated Press

January 21, 2014

Phillip Rawls

MONTGOMERY | Reacting to the ruckus in Washington over the Internal Revenue Service, the Alabama House voted Tuesday to make it a misdemeanor crime for state or local tax officials to audit an individual or group because of their political views.

The bill's sponsor, Republican Rep. Wayne Johnson of Ryland, said it is the result of how the IRS gave extra scrutiny to applications from tea party groups and others seeking tax-exempt status and delayed the applications for years.

"Our goal is to ensure that Alabamians never have to worry about their state government threatening them because of their political views," he said.

The bill cleared the House 74-22 Tuesday, with support coming primarily from Republicans and opposition from Democrats. The bill still must pass the Senate and be signed by the governor to become law.

The bill is part of the "Commonsense Conservative Agenda" being pushed by the House Republican Caucus during the election-year session that began last week.

Democratic opponents said the bill is designed to get tea party votes for Republicans, and it is addressing something that hasn't been a problem in Alabama.

"This is a proactive bill, so we can tell taxpayers we won't tolerate it here," Johnson said.

The House voted 71-26 to pass a bill to allow health care workers to decline to participate in an abortion, sterilization, cloning or human stem cell research if they have moral, religious or ethical objections. The bill by Republican Rep. Becky Nordgren of Gadsden, now goes to the Senate. Similar legislation cleared the House last year and died in the Senate.

"This bill is about protecting health care workers' rights," Nordgren said.

But Democratic Rep. John England of Tuscaloosa said it is a vote-getting gimmick for Republicans and that federal law already allows health care workers to decline to participate in an abortion or sterilization.

The Senate spent most of the afternoon debating, but not voting on, a bill to allow citizens to cast emergency absentee ballots when the governor declares a state of emergency, such as a hurricane approaching the coast.

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House approves healthcare conscience protection bill

Al.com

January 21, 2014

Kim Chandler

MONTGOMERY, Alabama -- The Alabama House of Representatives this afternoon approved a bill to give legal protection to healthcare workers who refuse to perform abortions and sterilization procedures for moral reasons.

The House approved the bill on a 71-26 vote.

Rep. Becky Nordgren, R-Gadsden, said healthcare workers should not be forced to perform procedures that violate their consciences.

"I've talked to several people who are afraid to say no," said Nordgren, the bill's sponsor.

Nordgren said the bill only applies to four situations -- abortion, sterilization, human cloning and human stem cell research.

Nordgren said health workers would have to submit written notice of their objections and have that on file with their employer. Their employers could not punish them for refusing to perform the procedures.

She gave the example of a tubal ligation.

"When it comes to tubals, you have the right to say, 'That's against my religion and I don't want to participate,'" she said.

Some Democrats questioned the need for the bill calling it election-year politics.

"This is not the most pressing issue facing Alabama today," said Rep. Patricia Todd, D-Birmingham, said.

"This is a feel good bill. This is 'I want to throw them some red meat, so they can see I really am against abortion,'" Todd said.

The bill now moves to the Alabama Senate.

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House OKs bill to let health-care providers opt out of performing some procedures

Montgomery Advertiser

January 22, 2013

Kala Kachmar

The House passed a bill Tuesday that would allow health-care providers to decline to perform services against their moral, religious or ethical values.

The bill, debated for several hours Tuesday afternoon, applies to procedures related to abortions, human embryonic stem cell research, human cloning and sterilization. Any health-care provider would be able to refuse to assist, counsel, perform, advise or participate in any part of those procedures as long as written notice is given to his or her employer 24 hours prior.

The bill exempts those health-care workers from being liable for declining to participate in the service unless a patient's life is in immediate danger. Hospitals also would be immune from liability if any damage was caused by refusal to provide one of those services.

The legislation does not apply to abortion clinics. It passed 71-26.

Rep. Becky Nordgren, R-Gadsden, who sponsored the bill, said its purpose is to protect health-care workers from being forced to do something that contradicts their beliefs.

“It simply affords and provides an option, or a choice, to that provider,” said Rep. Greg Wren, R-Montgomery.

Donald Williamson, a health officer with the Alabama Department of Public Health, said he doesn’t think the bill will have any effect on the department.

“It probably creates a situation where most health-care providers will be able to work around those rare events where an employee may have a problem doing one or more of those,” Williamson said.

Williamson said he doesn’t think there are many facilities in the state cloning or doing stem cell research.

“Most of us in the health-care field for a long time know that there’s a reason patients choose doctors and doctors choose patients,” Williamson said. “On neither side do you want to compel someone to engage in a practice they’re not comfortable with.”

Danne Williams, senior vice president of government relations for the Alabama Hospital Association, said the organization worked with the bill sponsors.

“We didn’t have any problems with it,” she said. “I don’t know of any specific incidents that have occurred that precipitated this.”

Several House Democrats, however, opposed the bill.

“This is not the most pressing issue facing Alabama today,” said Rep. Patricia Todd, D-Birmingham. “This is a feel-good bill to me. This is ‘I want to throw some red meat at people to show I’m really against abortion.’ ”

Todd said she’d be in support of the bill if someone could cite five situations in which health-care professionals were forced to perform a procedure they were morally against.

Rep. Chris England, D-Tuscaloosa, said the bill is simply codifying federal law, which already gives health-care providers the right to opt out of performing abortion-related procedures.

The Affordable Care Act gives health-care providers conscience protection within the new health exchanges, and three acts known as the Federal Health Care Provider Conscience Laws have, for decades, prohibited recipients of certain federal health-care dollars from discriminating against providers who refuse to participate in abortions or sterilization procedures.

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Alabama legislator introduces bill to declare parts of Obamacare 'null and void'

Al.com

January 21, 2014

Mike Cason

MONTGOMERY, Alabama --- An Alabama legislator has introduced a bill to “render null and void” parts of the federal Affordable Care Act, an effort that a legal expert says is futile because of the Supremacy Clause in the U.S. Constitution.

Rep. Barry Moore, R-Enterprise, is sponsor of the bill, which he calls the Alabama Freedom of Healthcare Protection Act.

Moore’s bill says that no state agency or employee can engage in any activity to enforce parts of the Affordable Care Act “that exceed the authority of the United States Constitution.”

Moore said he decided to introduce the bill after hearing from many people in his district complaining about how the Affordable Care Act has affected their health insurance.

“They’re either getting cancellation notices or their premiums are just absolutely going through the roof,” Moore said. “So the undue burden that we’re putting on Alabama families, I just don’t know how I can sit idly by and not try to do something.”

John Carroll, dean of the Cumberland School of Law at Samford University, said the Legislature can’t pass a law that overrides federal law.

“Any legislation that forbids a state official from complying with a federal law won’t get anywhere from the outset,” Carroll said. “There’s something called the Supremacy Clause, which means federal law is the supreme law of the land until a court says the law does not need to be enforced.”

Carroll said the way to challenge a federal law is through the court system. He said Moore’s bill would probably be quickly challenged in court if it became law and the state tried to enforce it.

Asked about potential cost to taxpayers should his bill become law and face a court challenge, Moore said he was concerned about his constituents paying more for insurance because of the Affordable Care Act. He said his bill might not be the answer, but he wants to try something.

“I know a lot of people in my district overwhelmingly want to see if we can do something to stop it,” Moore said. “So this is our effort. It’s one of the efforts. We’re going to continue to fight.”

The bill is not the first Alabama lawmakers have proposed in response to Obamacare. Last year, a bill called the Religious Liberty Act said that “religiously affiliated or motivated employers” did not have to provide health insurance plans that cover contraception, one of the requirements of the Affordable Care Act.

That bill passed the House but died in the Senate.

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Tracking the 2014 session: Senate Democrats delay; House GOP passes two priority bills

Al.com

Mike Cason

January 22, 2014

MONTGOMERY, Alabama --- Action in the Alabama Legislature on Tuesday followed a familiar pattern.

The House of Representatives passed two bills from the GOP majority's Commonsense Conservative package. House Democrats introduced an ambitious agenda that's probably going nowhere. And the Senate did little, partly because of a filibuster by the Democratic minority. The House and Senate judiciary committees got together for a public hearing on a bill to accelerate death penalty appeals.

What they did:

The House:

-- Passed a bill to make it a crime for the state Department of Revenue to retaliate against, harass or threaten a taxpayer. It comes in response to the IRS targeting of Tea Party and conservative groups that were seeking tax exempt status. Moves to Senate.

-- Passed a bill to say doctors and nurses don't have to do procedures that violate their consciences, including abortions and sterilizations. Moves to Senate.

The Senate

-- Passed a proposed constitutional amendment for Mobile County to dissolve the Prichard Water and Sewer Board and place the system under the Mobile Area Water and Sewer System. Moves to House.

Coming up:

House and Senate committees are scheduled to vote on the death penalty appeals bill.

Senate committees will consider:

-- Five bills to tighten rules on welfare recipients, including one to require drug tests for some.

-- A bill to establish an independent panel to hear taxpayer appeals.

-- A bill to ban smoking in work places and some public places.

-- A bill to say that a scholarship program for veterans' families applies whether or not the veteran served in a war.

-- A bill to move the voting registration deadline from 10 days to 17 days before an election.

House committees will consider:

-- A bill to regulate tanning parlors, adding restrictions on use by teenagers.

-- A bill to authorize a bond issue to help local school systems switch to digital textbooks.

The House and Senate convene at 3 p.m.

Quotes of the day:

"It's been 26 long years. There's been no reason for this to go on as long as it has." Denise Gurganas, whose sister Karen Lane was murdered 26 years ago. The killer is still on death row.

"We need time to uncover evidence of innocence. And it does happen." Defense lawyer Richard Jaffe, who had a client who was freed after 19 years on death row.

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Senate General Fund chair seeks more money for prison system

Montgomery Advertiser

January 21, 2014

Brian Lyman

The chairman of the Senate's General Fund budget committee Tuesday said he remained committed to finding more money for the state Department of Corrections following a U.S. Department of Justice report that conditions at Julia Tutwiler Prison for Women in Wetumpka violated inmates' Eighth Amendment protections against cruel and unusual punishment.

Sen. Arthur Orr, R-Decatur, told the Montgomery Advertiser last week he disagreed with Gov. Robert Bentley's proposal to effectively level fund the department. He repeated that Tuesday and said he was working with his House counterpart, Rep. Steve Clouse, R-Ozark, to find additional funding in the tight General Fund budget.

"Before this report even came out, we were talking between the two of us that we would like to work with the governor to increase the funding above level-funding," he said.

In a letter to Bentley last week, the U.S Department of Justice said Alabama was violating Tutwiler inmates' Eighth Amendment protection "by failing to protect women prisoners at Tutwiler from harm due to sexual abuse and harassment from correctional staff."

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

With the support of Bentley and Orr, the Legislature last year approved a \$17 million increase in Corrections funding, which included money to fund security improvements at the prison that were aimed at addressing the problems at the prison, first reported by the Montgomery-based Equal Justice Initiative in 2012.

Kim Thomas, the commissioner of the Alabama Department of Corrections, was unavailable for comment Tuesday. A message left with Bentley’s office seeking comment was not returned.

Thomas told the Advertiser on Sunday that the letter did not account for “proactive” measures taken by the department to address the problems.

“The letter is based on a visit from last year,” Thomas said. “It does not give us enough credit for being productive. We are still trying to get everybody on board.”

Orr said it was “too early to tell” whether additional funding would help address Tutwiler’s problems, or if the changes needed to be procedural.

“I know that money is usually a help to those agencies that are fiscally challenged, and Corrections is one of those,” he said.

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Families describe agony of delayed executions; defense lawyers say bill could cause execution of innocents

Al.com

January 21, 2014

Kim Chandler

MONTGOMERY, Alabama -- Denise Gurganus' voice shook as she described the murder of her sister Karen Lane in 1988.

Twenty-six years later her sister’s killer still sits on Death Row. Gurganus, 59, said their mother has already passed away and their father wonders if he will live to see the death sentence carried out.

"Until you have lost a loved one to a murder like my sister went through, you can not imagine what you go through on a daily basis," Gurganus said.

“It's been 26 long years. There's been no reason for this to go on as long as it has," Gurganus told members of the House and Senate Judiciary Committees.

The committees held a joint public hearing today on a bill aimed at shortening the appeal process in death penalty cases. The bill would require Rule 32 appeals, which look at issues like the trial lawyer's competency, to be filed much earlier.

Defense lawyer Richard Jaffe told committee members a different story.

He had a client who spent 19 years on Death Row before being freed in 1997.

"If it wasn't for the Rule 32 procedures, he would be dead," Jaffe said.

Currently, a person given the death penalty has a series of direct appeals, first to the Alabama Court of Criminal Appeals, and then to the Alabama Supreme Court and the U.S. Supreme Court. After those are complete, the defendant can begin Rule 32 appeals, post-conviction appeals that look at other issues such as the trial lawyer's competence.

"It took a matter of two hours to kill, but it has taken all of this time for justice to be served," Carter said.

The proposed legislation, dubbed "The Fair Justice Act", would run both sets of appeals simultaneously. Capital defendants would be required to file Rule 32 petitions within 180 days of filing their first direct appeal. Death Row inmates could still make federal appeals.

Jaffe said Rule 32 issues often aren't identified until years later when someone takes an independent review of the trial work.

"We need time to uncover evidence of innocence. And it does happen," Jaffe said.

The bill is backed by Attorney General Luther Strange and the Alabama District Attorneys' Association.

Walker County District Attorney Bill Adair said a quicker Rule 32 appeal would allow hearings while memories and evidence are still fresh.

"Let's get to the evidence quicker. That's what this bill is about," Adair said.

Defense lawyer Bill Clark said the state is facing a shortage of lawyers to handle death penalty cases.

Texas has a similar process to streamline appeals. Committee members asked questions during the hearing, but debate was limited to allow time for the speakers.

Sherrie Carter said 17 years after the killing of her brother-in-law, Bryan Carter, her family is waiting for the death sentence to be carried out.

"It took a matter of two hours to kill, but it has taken all of this time for justice to be served," Carter said.

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GOP legislators push to fix US Constitution

Decatur Daily

January 21, 2014

MONTGOMERY — Republican legislators concerned about the federal debt are trying to set up guidelines for Alabama to participate in a state-led constitutional convention.

Sens. Arthur Orr, of Decatur, and Trip Pittman, of Daphne, have introduced two bills setting up how the Legislature would choose Alabama's delegates to a state-led constitutional convention and limits they would operate under if a constitutional convention is called under Article 5 of the U.S. Constitution.

Alabama's Legislature is among 20 nationwide that has voted to support a constitutional convention under Article 5 for passing a federal balanced budget amendment. Alabama's vote came in 2011. Thirty-four states are needed for a convention to occur. Any proposal from that convention would need the approval of 38 states.

At a news conference Tuesday, Orr conceded that a constitutional convention is "very, very far away," but he said it's time for Alabama to lay the groundwork.

Orr and Pittman said the legislation has nothing to do with this year's legislative elections. Democrats doubt that.

"I think that is just fantasy and some type of right-wing thing," said Rep. Marcel Black, D-Tuscumbia.

He also questioned how some can praise the Constitution while wanting it changed.

"We need to be working on the serious problems of this state," Black said. "When we get it raised to a certain level, then we can go on to fantasy land."

Orr and Pittman proposed the legislation after attending the Mount Vernon Assembly in December. It involved legislators from 32 states talking about amending the Constitution to restrain federal power.

Rep. Ken Johnson, R-Moulton, last week introduced a resolution calling for a constitutional convention to impose fiscal constraints and term limits and to limit the jurisdiction of the federal government. He called Washington, D.C., a "runaway entity."

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Two top Ala. Senators propose bills laying out guidelines for Convention of States

Yellowhammer News

January 21, 2014

Cliff Sims

Two top-ranking Alabama State Senators today held a press conference to stress the importance of establishing guidelines for amending the U.S. Constitution through a Convention of the States, as outlined in Article V of the Constitution.

Working with lawmakers from 31 other states through the Mt. Vernon Assembly, Senators Arthur Orr, R-Decatur, and Trip Pittman, R-Montrose, are sponsoring two bills that would set parameters on delegates to an amendment convention in the event one is called to amend the U.S. Constitution.

Under Article V of the nation's governing document, an amendment convention can be convened if two-thirds of state legislatures, or 34 states, approve an application for the convention to occur. Proposed amendments would then have to be ratified by three-fourths, or 38 states.

The proposed bills in the Alabama legislature designate a process by which delegates are selected to represent Alabama at the convention and establish guidelines for delegates to follow.

Senate Bill 199, sponsored by Pittman, is designed to hold potential delegates accountable by requiring the Legislature to adopt instructions for delegates, in addition to providing that a vote by a delegate outside the scope of the Legislature's instructions is void.

"From out-of-control spending to seemingly endless gridlock, it's easy to see why so many Americans think Washington is broken," Pittman said. "Fortunately our nation's Founding Fathers had the foresight to provide states with a mechanism to hold the federal government accountable. Article V of the U.S. Constitution is an important protection tool for states to use against a runaway federal government. It's equally important, however, that the states have checks in place to ensure delegates honestly represent the views and beliefs of Alabamians, not special interests. These two bills will ensure that Alabama's delegates are accountable to the people if and when a convention of states is convened."

[RELATED: Alabama legislator introduces resolution calling for Convention of the States]

Senate Bill 200, sponsored by Orr, establishes qualifications for delegates and gives the Legislature the authority to appoint and recall delegates.

"Nearly three out of four Americans believe the country is headed in the wrong direction," Orr explained. "The national debt is skyrocketing, only to be compounded by trillions of dollars in unfunded entitlement programs. By many accounts, the federal government has far overstepped its bounds with unprecedented regulations into numerous areas of our economy and everyday lives. Given the dire outlook, many are realizing that a state-led amendment convention is our best hope for a positive change of direction. If nothing else, this movement of states is a sharp reminder to Congress that we mean business."

Orr and Pittman also pointed out that while all amendments to the U.S. Constitution to date have been proposed by Congress, 20 states, including Alabama, have petitioned Congress to call a state-led convention on a balanced budget amendment to control unchecked federal spending.

This coalition, they said, shows a positive trend of states that are ready and willing to take on a crucial problem Congress has long ignored.

In 2011, the Alabama House and Senate passed Senate Joint Resolution 100, sponsored by Orr, formally petitioning Congress to call a convention under Article V for the specific purpose of passing a federal balanced budget amendment, requiring that, in the absence of a national emergency, federal spending for any fiscal year not exceed total federal revenue.

Both SB199 and SB200 have received their first reading and are pending action by the Senate Committee on Constitution, Campaign Finance, Ethics and Elections.

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State school board makes curriculum changes

Dothan Eagle

November 21, 2014

Jim Cook

The Alabama State Board of Education recently revised state standards for English and mathematics, making changes desired by parents and necessary to clarify goals.

On Jan. 17 the board changed math requirements to place certain segments of math curriculum back in more grade-level appropriate settings. Cindy Freeman, state college and career ready rollout coordinator, said the changes moved matrices from Algebra 2 to calculus and a significant portion of statistics instruction from geometry to pre-calculus.

Freeman said the changes, which were requested by parents and teachers, moved the sequencing of instruction back to their configuration prior to adoption of Common Core standards, or college and career ready standards, as they are known in Alabama.

The board also explicitly stated in its changes to state standards that Algebra I can be taught before the ninth grade. Freeman said the change will make it clear that systems can offer Algebra I to younger students.

The board also outlined grammar reinforcement requirements for grades 3-12. Freeman said recently - adopted standards needed more specification with regard to instruction.

“It’s basically a grammar refresher every year,” she said.

According to the education department, the changes were suggested by state educators and parents with no input from the federal government. The changes will not impact federal funding.

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On the 41st anniversary of Roe v. Wade, Alabama is slowly making pro-life progress

Yellowhammer News

January 22, 2014

Cliff Sims

On this day in 1973, The Supreme Court of the United States ruled in Roe v. Wade that abortion is legal in all 50 of these United States.

Four decades later, over 50 million unborn American babies — roughly 3,000 each day — have seen their lives snatched from them before they even took their first breath. In any other context that would be considered genocide on a scale the world has never seen.

Abortion By The Numbers

Americans United for Life, a national pro-life organization, last week released a report ranking the most pro-life states in the country. Alabama came in at number 20.

“I’ve noticed that everyone who is for abortion has already been born.” – Ronald Reagan

Alabama has long had one of the most pro-life electorates in the country. Unfortunately, our legislature for decades didn’t reflect that. Democrats who controlled the legislature until 2010 did little to nothing to protect the unborn. Thankfully, Republicans have started pushing in the right direction since becoming the majority Party.

Numerous pro-life bills have become law since Republicans took control.

The Pain-Capable Unborn Child Protection Act sponsored by Rep. Kerry Rich, R-Albertville, and Sen. Scott Beason, R-Gardendale, protects unborn children who are capable of feeling pain except when the mother “has a condition which so complicates her medical condition as to necessitate the abortion of her pregnancy to avert death or... substantial or irreversible physical impairment of a major bodily function.” Outside of that, this law states that “it is necessary to preserve the life of an unborn child.”

The Women’s Health and Safety Act sponsored by Rep. Mary Sue McClurkin, R-Indian Springs, improved and strengthened the standards of care at women’s clinics in Alabama. By requiring clinics that provide abortions to meet the same facility standards as ambulatory care centers and calling for doctors who provide abortions to have admitting privileges at local hospitals, this bill made it increasingly difficult for abortion clinics to remain open in Alabama.

“The right to life is the first among human rights.” – Pope Francis

The Best Interest of the Child Act sponsored by Rep. Mike Jones and Sen. Jerry Fielding, R-Sylacauga, cut down on the time it takes to move children out of foster care and into permanent homes in Alabama.

Several other pro-life bills did not, or have not yet, become law, mainly due to unfortunate timing.

For instance, in 2011, the Alabama Senate passed several pro-life bills at the very end of the session, not leaving enough time for the House to pass them and send them to the governor.

Democrats, especially Sen. Rodger Smitherman, D-Birmingham, filibustered every pro-life bill that came up for a vote, effectively “running out the clock” on the 2011 session.

Senator Greg Reed, R-Jasper sponsored a bill during that session that would have allowed the State of Alabama to opt out of allowing abortion coverage by health plans participating in the ObamaCare healthcare exchange.

Sen. Shad McGill sponsored a bill which stated that private health insurance plans and policies offered in Alabama “shall only offer abortion coverage through the purchase, by an individual policyholder, of a separate rider and through the payment of an additional premium for such coverage.”

Sen. Gerald Allend, R-Tuscaloosa sponsored the Abortion-Inducing Drug Safety Act, which would have made it unlawful to administer any abortion-inducing drug to a woman without her receiving an exam by a physician beforehand. It would have also provided physicians with guidelines to follow in administering an abortion-inducing drug.

Sen. Phil Williams, R-Rainbow City, sponsored a bill that would have provided that the term “persons” as used in the Code of Alabama would include all humans from the moment of fertilization in the womb.

“A person is a person no matter how small.” – Dr. Seuss

Several other pro-life bills are currently making their way through the legislature.

Yesterday, The Healthcare Rights of Conscience Act sponsored by Rep. Becky Nordgren, R-Gadsden, passed the Alabama House. The bill states that Alabama health care providers would have the right to refuse to participate in a specific service that violates their conscience if their objections are submitted in writing and placed on file prior to being asked. Services they could decline to perform include those related to abortion, human cloning, human embryonic stem cell research, and sterilization. This bill now goes to the Senate.

Rep. Paul Lee, R-Dothan, is also sponsoring the Adoption Tax Credit bill that provides a \$1,000 one-time tax credit to families who adopt an Alabama child. That bill is up in the house today.

We must continue to compassionately, yet boldly speak out in favor of every person’s God-given right to life and encourage our legislature to keep pushing until Alabama’s laws reflect the true character of its people.

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House Democrats seek lottery, teacher raise and the end of the Accountability Act

Al.com

January 21, 2013

Kim Chandler

MONTGOMERY, Alabama -- Democrats in the Alabama House of Representatives announced a 2014 agenda that includes a state lottery, a 6 percent teacher pay raise and the repeal of private school tax credits approved last session.

“It’s all about schools, and it’s all about jobs,” House Minority Leader Craig Ford, D-Gadsden, said of their agenda.

Rep. Marcel Black, D-Tuscumbia, said the 2 percent pay raise being proposed by Gov. Robert Bentley is not a real raise since teachers have been asked to chip in more for their benefits in recent years.

Ford is backing a state referendum on a Georgia-style lottery to pay for college scholarships to A/B students and put a security officer in public schools. Alabamians voted down an education lottery in 1999, but Ford said it is time to revisit the idea.

“We want to give people the right to vote,” Ford said.

Democrats are also seeking to repeal the Alabama Accountability Act approved last session that gives tax credits to families at “failing” public schools can use to help pay private school tuition.

Rep. Joe Hubbard, D-Montgomery, has proposed a \$1 tobacco tax to raise money for Alabama’s cash-strapped Medicaid program. “That money can fill the hole in Medicaid and provide enough funding for the pay raises for state employees and retirees,” Hubbard said.

The bills face steep odds in the firmly GOP-controlled Alabama Legislature. However, Ford said the agenda is about ideas they believe in, and not election-year politics.

“That’s another danger of the Republican supermajority is that they can dictate what bills are brought to the floor,” Ford said.

House Democrats are also seeking the repeal of the Rolling Reserve Act, which limits how much revenue growth legislators can project when they build the education budget. Ford said Republicans are already skirting the budgeting reform.

Republican Speaker of the House Mike Hubbard said Democrats should call their plan “the 'Tax It, Spend It, and Repeal It' agenda.”

“While House Republicans are focused on bold new solutions that improve education, create jobs, and change the broken status quo in Alabama, the Democrats want to dismantle our conservative reforms, just like Barack Obama and his liberal allies are doing on the federal level. The Democrats' proposal is nothing more than a road map back to the failed policies and shaky state finances of Alabama's past.”

One bill on the Democrats' agenda also takes a shot at a series of GOP legislative resignations last year. The proposal would require lawmakers who resign midterm to pay for the special

election to name their replacement. It makes an exception for lawmakers who resign for health issues or to take a governmental appointment.

Although it was not on their official agenda, Ford said Democrats are also pushing for an expansion of Alabama's Medicaid program under the Affordable care Act.

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Forbes lists Auburn among top 25 places to retire

Opelika-Auburn News

January 21, 2014

Kristen Oliver

Forbes has listed Auburn among the country's top 25 places to retire.

Auburn Mayor Bill Ham mentioned the ranking at the City Council's regular meeting Tuesday.

"Auburn has garnered recent media attention toward its exceptional quality of life," Ham said. "The publisher of Forbes Magazine recently showed its admiration for Auburn in a list of top 25 places to retire in 2014."

Forbes attributed Auburn's ranking in the top 25 to its good economy, warm climate, status as a college town and low crime levels. It also listed Auburn's cost of living as 11 percent below the national average and the average home price as \$165,000.

The ranking lists the top 25 cities alphabetically, so order is unknown, but David Dorton, director of public affairs for the city, said it is always good for the city to be recognized for its quality of life.

"It's always nice to see these recognitions that are unsolicited," Dorton said. "We're not out there looking for them, so it's always good to see people recognizing Auburn for its economy and the fact that Auburn is a great place to live for all kinds of people."

The City Council also approved a short list of items at the meeting Tuesday, including conditional use approval for a multiple-family development or performance residential development.

The property for the development comprises 12 acres east of Shelton Mill Road and south of Grace Ridge Drive. The development, called Grace Point, is the second phase of a project that included Grace Ridge housing on Shelton Mill Road as the first phase.

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Educators say both books, technology needed

Times Daily

January 22, 2013

Lisa Singleton-Rickman

For area school systems, the issue isn't whether textbooks or electronic devices are better in classrooms, but to what degree technology must be implemented, how soon and at what cost? So far, the Florence school district is the only one locally that has implemented a one-to-one initiative with students having full access to their textbook content and educational supplements through iPads that are assigned to them for the school year. The program began in 2011 with 10th-graders being the first to get the computers.

Since then, students from fifth grade and up have gotten them, and every classroom in grades K-4 has six iPads. Superintendent Janet Womack said there is currently no plan for a one-to-one initiative for the lower grades. "We still see a great need to have a blended approach to learning, so those (younger) students have plenty of access to the iPads as well."

The initiative is expensive, which is one reason more schools aren't doing it. Cost is also a drawback for the Alabama Legislature, which has yet to seriously consider funding such technology in full or even in part for the state's school districts.