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FULL TEXT

Gov. Robert Bentley declares state of emergency, postpones special elections

Al.com

January 27, 2014

Mike Cason

MONTGOMERY, Alabama – Gov. Robert Bentley called for Alabamians to hunker down for a couple of days of potentially treacherous weather, declaring a state of emergency effective at 6 a.m. Tuesday.

Bentley postponed for one week three special legislative elections that had been scheduled for Tuesday. The elections are in House District 31 in Elmore and Coosa counties, House District 104 in Mobile County and House District 53 in Jefferson County.

He said state offices would open Tuesday morning but might close later in the day or for Wednesday.

National Weather Service Meteorologist Jim Stefkovich said south Alabama could see one-tenth inch to one-quarter inch of ice on Tuesday.

“That’s going to be the real nightmare,” Stefkovich said.

The precipitation is expected to begin Tuesday morning and end by about midnight. But cold temperatures on Wednesday mean that the treacherous road conditions will persist.

Stefkovich said the heaviest snow, as much as about three inches, is expected over a band of central Alabama from just north of Montgomery to about Troy. But he said snow was expected as far north as the Interstate 20 corridor.

Asked whether Alabamians should expect a storm similar to one that blanketed the state in snow in 1993, Stefkovich said it would be more like the January 2011 storm that coated roadways with ice.

"It's going all the way to the coast ... all those exposed bridges," Stefkovich said. "It could be really hairy."

Alabama Department of Transportation Director John Cooper said trucks and equipment to place salt and salt brine on icy roads was being moved to south Alabama. He said he expected most of the major roadways to be treated with salt, salt brine or sand.

Bentley urged Alabamians to keep travel to a minimum, check the DOT website for road conditions and to check on their neighbors, especially the elderly.

Bentley activated the Alabama National Guard to be on stand-by in support of winter weather operations. The Alabama Emergency Management Agency is activating its State Emergency Operations Center to monitor the storm and assist county EMAs.

EMA Divisions in Mobile, Troy and Montgomery will activate at 7:00 a.m. Tuesday.

The governor said concerns about the availability of propane persist. He declared a state of emergency because of the threat of a propane shortage last week. The problem is especially serious for chicken farmers. Bentley said the main problem is there are not enough trucks to transport propane.

"We would like to ask everyone across the state to please conserve as much as possible their propane because we just don't know when that problem is going to be solved," Bentley said.

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Alabama Legislature's plans uncertain due to snow

The Associated Press

January 28, 2014

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — Legislative leaders are taking a wait-and-see approach to the meeting schedules for the House and Senate this week due to the weather.

Spokesmen say the House will meet at 1 p.m. Tuesday as planned and the Senate at 2 p.m. Tuesday. Then officials will assess the weather and decide what to do.

The House and Senate had set Tuesday's meeting times before the forecast for snow and ice. Their original plan was to have committee meetings Wednesday and sessions of the House and Senate on Thursday. But legislative spokesmen say that will be re-evaluated on Tuesday afternoon.

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Legislators discuss health care, education at forum

Opelika-Auburn News

January 28, 2014

Drew Taylor

In the midst of the Alabama legislative season, four legislators representing Lee County answered questions from the community Monday night.

The League of Women Voters of East Alabama hosted a legislative forum at the Auburn Council Chambers, where nearly 60 people attended to see Sen. Billy Beasley, Sen. Gerald Dial, House Speaker Mike Hubbard, Rep. Mark Tuggle and Rep. Pebblin Warren.

One of the biggest issues discussed during the two-hour exchange was education, specifically the Accountability Act. Beasley said that despite the common goal each legislator has to bring better education to children, he felt the legislation was misleading and was more about private school opportunities than anything else.

“The way it was brought to the legislature was deceitful,” Beasley said.

Hubbard, however, disagreed with Beasley and said the act was doing what it could to make things better.

“You should never have a situation where a child is trapped in a failing school,” Hubbard said. “I can promise you that if we kept doing the same thing over and over that we’ve done the last 50 years, we’re going to get the same result, but we’re doing something and we’re trying to address the situation.”

Rep. Tuggle spoke along the same lines as Hubbard, saying it gave children an opportunity to reach better schools and that people who may disagree with him know that.

“They know the reality of failing schools and they know what it does to the future of a child and the future of this state,” Tuggle said.

Another big issue was Medicaid and Gov. Robert Bentley’s recent decision to not expand the program in the state. Beasley said the expansion of Medicaid was important for the economic vitality of the state and that he and other legislators would work to encourage Bentley to reconsider.

“I believe that you can create 30,000 new jobs in Alabama that would be significant and able to provide healthcare,” Beasley said.

Hubbard said that as it stands now, Medicaid doesn’t do enough and expanding it would only throw more money at the issue.

“We can’t afford what we have now,” Hubbard said. “It does have a pretty substantial impact on us here in Alabama and its not that I’m not sympathetic to the people who need it, but I think it's upon us to figure out a way and make sure we can pay for it before jumping into it.”

Dial said that during this legislative session, he would work toward making resources better in Alabama’s schools.

“We need to continue to work to replace textbooks with the technology to move our education into the 21st century,” Dial said.

Warren said that in addition to working to expand Medicaid, she would work toward finding more work training for her constituents.

“There are so many out there that we need to actively train for the workforce,” Warren said.

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Birmingham set to spend \$130,000 on state lobbyists, Water Works bill opposition high on priority list

Al.com

January 28, 2014

Joseph D. Bryant

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama -- A former state senator, a law firm with ties to a former governor and a former longtime Birmingham Water Works chairman are among the slate of lobbyists set to represent the city of Birmingham at the State House.

The City Council this morning will vote on \$130,000 in contracts for four lobbyists for the current legislative session.

Proposed contracts are: \$50,000 for Jay Murrill a lawyer with Riley & Jackson; \$40,000 for Anthony Barnes, a Birmingham businessman and former longtime Water Works Board

chairman; \$25,000 to Daryl O. Perkins of Master Solutions and \$15,000 to Kurt Lee, a former Republican state senator from Walker County.

Riley & Jackson, a Homewood firm, was founded by Rob Riley Jr. and Keith Jackson. Riley is the son of former Alabama Governor Bob Riley.

The complete list was passed out Monday during the Budget and Finance Committee meeting.

A major issue for the city is opposition to proposed legislation to change the composition and operation of the Birmingham Water Works Board.

"We think it's important for us to have a team of people to go down as a unified front for the city of Birmingham to advocate for bills and fight against others," Council President Johnathan Austin told AL.com.

Lawmakers began the 2014 legislative session Jan. 14.

Birmingham's new lobbyists would join representatives already hired by the Water Works Board to meet with legislators, in part, to quash proposals from State Sen. Jabo Waggoner, R-Vestavia Hills, and Rep. Paul Demarco, R-Homewood.

The bills would put a \$500 monthly cap on board member pay, mandate a two-term limit for board service, and require public hearings before water rate increases.

The most controversial parts of the proposal involve expanding the five-member board to include representatives from other counties and limiting board pay. Currently, the entire board is appointed by the Birmingham City Council.

Councilman Steven Hoyt complained there was not enough discussion about the list of proposed lobbyists before a completed slate was passed out Monday afternoon.

"You said we were ten lanes moving in the same direction and I'm trying to figure out what street we're on," Hoyt said during the committee meeting before the committee endorsed the list. Hoyt is not a member of the committee.

Rather than traveling a smooth highway, Hoyt said it appeared that city leaders were more likely riding down an alley. Hoyt said his concern over the process would be evident with his vote during this morning's council meeting.

Bell defended the selection process, saying the current team was the result of collaboration between both the mayor and council offices.

"Lobbyists for the city have always been the purview of the mayor," Bell said. "This is the first time it has been invaded by the council."

Bell said the lobbyist lineup was the result of cooperation and a voluntary ceding of his authority.

"But I need your cooperation to make that happen," he said. "I'm trying to accommodate the council. I'm trying to be cooperative."

While Bell insisted that he was within his rights to select lobbyists, Councilwoman Kim Rafferty reminded that mayor that it was within the council's authority to either approve or deny the spending requests.

The four lobbyists will exceed the original \$100,000 the council set aside for lobbyists earlier this month.

Councilwoman Valerie Abbott, chairwoman of the Budget and Finance Committee, has pressed for more details on the lobbyists.

She continued to object to Bell's recommendation of Barnes, whose long tenure on the Water Works Board is frequently cited by critics of the utility.

Bell said Barnes will not work on opposing the water works legislation. Instead, he would work on other items, such as expansion of the historic tax credits.

Still, Abbott said his presence in Montgomery on behalf of the city sends the wrong message to legislators with their sights set on the water works.

The committee endorsed all four lobbyists with Abbott being the lone no vote against Barnes.

"The mayor knows how I feel about appointing Anthony Barnes, since he's been part of the problem at the water works," Abbott said. "He's an absolutely lovely man, but that has nothing to do with hiring him."

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National School Choice Week calls attention to educational alternatives, like charters

Al.com

January 28, 2014

Marie Leech

It's National School Choice Week, and that means the spotlight is on charter schools, magnet schools, private schools, online schools and even homeschooling.

The week gives students, parents and teachers in Alabama and across the country a chance to raise awareness of the different types of educational options available to families, organizers say. More than 45 events are planned in Alabama this week, in addition to 5,500 events nationwide.

"Alabama families know that when parents have the freedom to choose the best schools for their children, great things happen," said Andrew Campanella, president of National School Choice Week. "Student achievement increases, graduation rates rise and children are better prepared for real life."

Events across the state include rallies, school fairs, roundtable discussions, open houses and parent information sessions.

Charter schools - which are not allowed in Alabama since legislation allowing them has failed to pass - are a big component of school choice. Supporters say that while they are not a panacea, they give parents in areas of failing schools an option that won't break the bank.

Opponents say charter schools are anything but free, and take money away from traditional public schools.

While the charter school debate has been hot in Alabama for several years, the state remains one of eight that doesn't allow them.

According to the Center for Education Reform, 74 percent of Americans support school choice.

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Siegelman bribes named worst scandal ever by an American governor

Yellowhammer News

January 27, 2014

Cliff Sims

One of the most read technology and media sites on the internet has named former Ala. Gov. Don Siegelman's bribery scandal the worst ever by an American governor.

In a post titled "11 Political Scandals Worse Than Chris Christie's," Mashable.com lays out what they believe are the "biggest governor scandals in recent memory."

Here's what Mashable had to say about Siegelman:

Siegelman was convicted of taking bribes in return for campaign donations and is currently around two years into a 6.5 year prison term. He seems hopeful that he will be exonerated at some point by the Supreme Court or President Barack Obama for what he feels was an unfair conviction orchestrated by a politically biased Department of Justice under former President George W. Bush.

Illinois holds the distinction of being the only state with two governors on the list. Former Ill. Gov. George Ryan "served five years in federal prison for racketeering, conspiracy, tax fraud and lying to the Federal Bureau of Investigation." And Rod Blagojevich "is serving 14 years for various levels of corruption, including trying to sell off the Senate seat vacated by President Barack Obama."

Former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin somehow comes in at number two on the list, right behind Siegelman, in spite of never being convicted of anything.

According to Mashable, “a state investigation found Palin guilty of abusing power when she fired Public Safety Commissioner Walt Monegan.” In reality, the State of Alaska Personnel Board hired a Democrat to investigate Palin and he found that there was no reason to believe she had violated the state’s ethics standards. That’s clearly worse than Blago (#7) being convicted of selling a U.S. Senate seat or former Louisiana Gov. Edwin Edwards (#5) being convicted of extortion and racketeering and spending fourteen years in prison, right? Right.

You can check out the full list over at Mashable.com.

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Alabama's GOP lawmakers want fewer government-focused solutions from Obama

Montgomery Advertiser

January 28, 2014

Mary Orndorff Troyan

WASHINGTON — Alabama’s Republican members of Congress are bracing for a State of the Union speech on Tuesday that further alienates conservatives by calling for a larger government role to combat poverty, according to members of the state’s congressional delegation.

President Barack Obama will address a joint session of Congress at 8 p.m. The annual event seems less likely this year to produce avenues for bipartisan compromise, the Republicans said.

Rep. Martha Roby, R-Montgomery, is expecting partisan rhetoric about the growing gap between the rich and the poor in the U.S. and the persistent crisis of poverty.

“What I hope to hear from the president — but all indications are it won’t be this — but I’m hopeful I’ll hear him laying out opportunities for job growth based on the employee and what’s good for the American worker and taxpayer by reducing the size of government rather than expanding government programs,” Roby said Monday.

She said Obama’s expected call to increase the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour would invite unintended consequences. Democrats tend to favor an increase to better keep up with inflation. Republicans say an increase would hurt hiring.

“What good does it do a mom who missed out on a job because a company’s payroll was too high?” Roby said.

Another piece of Obama’s anti-poverty theme is expected to be education and increasing access to — and the quality of — pre-school programs for 4-year-olds. Roby said such proposals amount to federal intrusion into local decisions on schools.

“It’s not the responsibility of the president of the United States at the State of the Union to stand up and tell states how to educate our children,” Roby said Monday.

Sen. Jeff Sessions, R-Ala., said Obama’s call to give legal status to some of the 11 million immigrants in the country illegally would exacerbate the problems of the middle class by increasing the competition for jobs. Sessions opposed a Senate-passed plan to overhaul immigration laws and provide some of the 11 million a path to citizenship.

“What we have seen from the president — a plan to increase the minimum wage and extend unemployment compensation for people who are long-term unemployed — are plans that treat symptoms of the disease rather than the problem,” Sessions said Monday in an interview.

White House officials say the president will lay out plans for creating an economy that provides opportunity and rewards hard work.

“After all, it is a theme the president put front and center since he first ran for president in 2007, when he talked about his view that too many middle-class families are working harder and harder yet falling farther and farther behind,” said Josh Earnest, deputy press secretary at the White House. “He’ll talk about expanding economic opportunities for the middle class so every American — all Americans — have a good shot.”

Rep. Mike Rogers, R-Saks, said Obama’s focus on income inequality is a distraction from concerns in his district about the implementation of the Affordable Care Act.

“It makes me think his eye is not on the ball,” Rogers said.

He said employers and workers are worried about how the law will affect their employer-provided health insurance plans.

“Rather than the president trying to stir another pot for an election year, he needs to focus on the circumstances right now,” Rogers said.

The lone Democrat in Alabama’s congressional delegation, Rep. Terri Sewell of Birmingham, said increasing the minimum wage should be included in any agenda to improve the economy.

“No one wants anything to be given to them,” Sewell said. “They’re not looking for hand-outs, they’re looking for hand-ups.”

Sewell said she’ll be listening to the president’s speech for details on equipping American workers with valuable skills, making college loans more affordable and improving pay for women.

“I want to hear words of empowerment for those who hope to join the middle class,” she said. “I look forward to hearing practical solutions to long-term problems that have plagued my district and the nation.”

On the foreign policy front, Roby, who has large military installations in her district, worries Obama will reveal too much about the strategy for withdrawing troops from Afghanistan. In last year's address, Obama said that another 34,000 troops would come home and that the war would end by the end of 2014.

"I think the worst thing we can do is open our playbook and tell our enemies how long they have to wait," Roby said.

Sessions, a former federal prosecutor, said he would like Obama to retreat from recent comments downplaying the dangers of smoking marijuana. Obama told the *New Yorker* the drug is not any more dangerous than alcohol, but he told his daughters to avoid it because it is an unhealthy habit.

"I think it's one of the greatest errors he's made in the entire time of his presidency," Sessions said. "For 10 years I worked intensely with community groups in Alabama and particularly in Mobile where we successfully saw a reduction in the use of drugs by young people and adults as a result of a clear message that drug use is unacceptable."

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Obama hiking minimum pay for new federal contracts

The Associated Press

January 28, 2014

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Barack Obama will sign an executive order setting the minimum wage for workers under new federal contracts at \$10.10 an hour, the White House said Tuesday. The president will announce the increase during his State of the Union address.

The increase from a national minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour will not affect existing federal contracts, only new ones. Moreover, contract renewals will not be affected unless other terms of the agreement change.

The order would be one of the biggest examples in the State of the Union of Obama's vow to use presidential authority to push for policies by circumventing Congress.

Obama has been under pressure from liberal groups and employee advocates to use his executive authority to raise the minimum pay for federal contractors. By limiting the increase to new contracts, the order would affect far fewer employees than if it applied to all government contractors.

Still, the issue dovetails with what will be Obama's broader call for Congress to increase the national minimum wage to \$10.10 and tie future increases to inflation. Obama called last year for an increase in the minimum wage to \$9. This year he is lending his support to legislation sponsored by Democratic Sen. Tom Harkin of Iowa and Rep. George Miller, D-Calif. Their bill also would raise the minimum wage for tipped workers for the first time in more than two decades.

Increasing the wage for federal contractors does not require congressional action.

Rep. Steve King, R-Iowa, a six-term conservative and tea party favorite, said that Obama's proposal is unconstitutional. "We have a minimum wage. Congress has set it. For the president to simply declare I'm going to change this law that has passed is unconstitutional," King said Tuesday on CNN.

The White House said those who would benefit from the executive order include federally contracted janitors and construction workers as well as workers in military bases who wash dishes, serve food and do laundry.

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Congressman Byrne joins steel caucus, subcommittee responsible for Navy contracts

Al.com

January 27, 2014

Brendan Kirby

U.S. Rep. Bradley Byrne, R-Fairhope, on Monday joined congressional subcommittees that he says put him in the best position to safeguard Austal USA's naval contracts.

House Armed Services Committee Chairman Buck McKeon, R-Calif., notified Byrne that he would serve on the Seapower and Projection Forces Subcommittee and the Tactical Air and Land Forces Subcommittee. Earlier this month, the newly installed representative got an appointment to the Armed Services Committee.

The Seapower and Projection Forces Subcommittee has direct jurisdiction over policy for the U.S. Navy, which includes Austal's contracts to build ships in Mobile.

"These subcommittee assignments are a victory for our south Alabama workers at Austal and across the state line at Huntington Ingalls," Byrne said in a prepared statement. "From these subcommittees, I will work to protect the job-generating contracts for the cutting-edge Littoral Combat Ship and Joint High Speed Vessel built right here at home in the Port of Mobile. I look forward to working with Chairman McKeon and Subcommittee Chairman Forbes from these important posts."

Rep. Randy Forbes, R-Va., welcomed Byrne to the subcommittee. "Given Alabama's past and present contributions to American shipbuilding and his many years of distinguished public service, it is only fitting that Congressman Byrne play a leading role in ensuring the strength of American Seapower," Forbes said in a statement.

Byrne also announced that he has joined the House Shipbuilding Caucus and the House Steel Caucus.

Austal, which employs roughly 4,000 workers at the Port of Mobile, is the city's largest industrial employer. Huntington Ingalls Industries, a shipbuilding company that provides ships for the Coast Guard and the Navy, employs roughly 1,700 Alabamians at its Pascagoula facility.

“Shipbuilding is a major industry in Alabama's 1st Congressional District, representing thousands of jobs and the livelihood of thousands of south Alabama families,” Byrne stated. “This is an excellent place for me to craft policies with Members of Congress who share my commitment to jobs and building a naval fighting force for the next century.”

Byrne also indicated that his position in the steel caucus would be important to a region that includes a facility operated jointly by ArcelorMittal and Nippon Steel and Sumitomo Metal Corp., ThyssenKrupp, Outokumpu Oyj, Berg Pipe and SSAB.

“Our steel facilities are jobs providers for our region and state,” he stated. “I am excited to join the House Steel Caucus to work with Members whose districts encompass steel-producing interests across the country to forge agreements and foster better cooperation with this industry.”

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Jeff Sessions column: Obama's immigration plan 'crushing hammer blow to the middle class'

Al.com

January 27, 2014

Challen Stephens

U.S. Sen. Jeff Sessions, R-Mobile, continues to serve as a leading opponent of recent immigration reform plans, now arguing the GOP would commit "self-sabotage" by supporting the proposals of President Obama.

This morning Sessions appeared as the author of a column in USA Today: "Immigration spikes income inequality."

He argues that proposed increases in guest workers and immigration will harm out-of-work Americans. Sessions had helped lead opposition to the immigration proposal but forward by the so-called Gang of Eight in the U.S. Senate last year. That bill passed the Senate, but not the House.

House GOP leaders are expected to announce their position on immigration this week.

"Unfortunately," writes Sessions, "leaks reveal the leaders' plan mirrors central elements of the president's plan, combining work permits for millions of illegal immigrants with large permanent increases in the flow of new workers from abroad. This would be an extraordinary act of self-sabotage."

He concludes: "The choice is clear. Either the GOP can help the White House deliver a crushing hammer blow to the middle class -- or it can stand alone as the one party defending the legitimate interests of American workers."

For the full column, [click here](#).