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FULL TEXT

Alabama Legislature trying to resume work

The Associated Press

January 30, 2014

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — The Alabama Legislature is trying to get back to work after a winter storm and icy roads interrupted its business.

Legislative leaders say they hope to get enough lawmakers to Montgomery to meet Thursday afternoon.

A majority of the members of the House of Representatives was unable to make it to Montgomery to meet Tuesday. The Senate did work Tuesday, but neither chamber tried to meet Wednesday because of bad road conditions.

The Senate plans to spend Thursday afternoon working on bills that have to be passed to authorize the continuation of various state boards and agencies.

The return of the Legislature coincides with state agencies reopening at noon Thursday.

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Alabama legislators return to work today after skipping Wednesday because of weather

Al.com

January 30, 2014

Mike Cason

MONTGOMERY, Alabama --- Alabama legislators are scheduled to return to work this morning after skipping their normally busy day of committee meetings on Wednesday because of the weather.

A few committee meetings were scheduled for this morning.

A Senate committee scheduled for 8:30 a.m. was cancelled because only two committee members showed up.

The House of Representatives and Senate are scheduled to convene at 10 a.m.

The House did not have enough members to meet on Tuesday. The Senate barely did and passed about 20 noncontroversial bills.

House Speaker Mike Hubbard said Tuesday he did not expect to have a quorum at 10 a.m. today but said the plan is to wait until enough members arrive to make a quorum.

Today will be the ninth meeting day in the 30-day legislative session.

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Stranded Ala. students, motorists getting home

The Associated Press

January 29, 2014

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (AP) — Thousands of people stranded overnight at school, at work or in their cars began getting home Wednesday as ice melted from Alabama highways and crews cleared roads littered with wrecked and abandoned vehicles.

The winter storm that hit Alabama on Tuesday was wider and more severe than many officials expected. The National Weather Service revised its forecast shortly before snow and ice started falling, but for many citizens the warning came too late. Five people died in crashes that state troopers said appeared weather-related. The deaths were near Wetumpka, Marion and Cottondale.

Thousands of wrecked and abandoned cars were scattered across Birmingham area roads Wednesday. The state Department of Transportation towed cars from Interstate 20 to make it passable.

"It looked like the zombie apocalypse," Republican state Rep. Mack Butler of Rainbow City said Wednesday. He was driving to a meeting of the Legislature on Tuesday when he had to stop at a gas station in Birmingham and spent the night in his pickup truck because highways were impassable.

Warmer weather Thursday is expected to finish clearing roads, but many schools in south and central Alabama are remaining closed. State offices will reopen at noon Thursday. "The traffic is proceeding very slowly, but we are making progress," Gov. Robert Bentley said Wednesday afternoon.

It was much different Tuesday night.

Linda Moore spent 12 hours stuck in her car on Interstate 65 south of Birmingham before a firefighter used a ladder to help her cross the median wall and a shuttle bus took her to a hotel where about 20 other stranded motorists spent the night in a conference room.

"I boo-hooed a lot," she said. "It was traumatic. I'm just glad I didn't have to stay on that interstate all night, but there are still people out there."

Moore's car moved less than 4 miles and burned a half-tank of gas during the ordeal. Her daughter, a teacher, was stranded at school with kindergarteners overnight.

Karen Evans spent the night with about 100 people at the Pelham Civic Complex after being unable to get home to Columbiana. She left work after 10 a.m. and had only moved a few miles on U.S. 31 by 5 p.m., but she did make it to the shelter.

"People were getting out of their cars and just leaving them in the road," Evans said. State helicopters flew over Jefferson and Shelby counties searching for stranded motorists who hadn't received help, and 350 National Guard troops were activated to help with rescues. But state Emergency Management Director Art Faulkner said none was found who hadn't received assistance.

About 11,000 children were stranded at schools statewide Tuesday night because buses couldn't get them home and parents couldn't get to the schools, said Michael Sibley, a spokesman for the Alabama Department of Education. Most were in the Birmingham area.

Some 1,600 children remained in schools by late Wednesday afternoon, and some would have to spend a second night, he said.

At Deer Valley Elementary School in Hoover, second-grade teacher Lindsey Calton Nichols joined other teachers in caring for 200 students overnight. They watched movies, slept on gym mats with coats for blankets, and ate sausage biscuits and fresh strawberries for breakfast. "There were no tears. The kids were actually having lots of fun," she said.

Volunteers with four-wheel-drive trucks carried students home throughout the night and morning. Her husband spent the night with their 2-year-old son at a nearby child care center. A volunteer they had never met gave them a ride home around 11 a.m. Wednesday, along with the last student Nichols had left in her class.

"We at the schools were the lucky ones and the safe ones. It's the people stranded in cars and the people rescuing them who need to be prayed for," she said.

One of those volunteers, Hoover builder Sean Denard, said he used his four-wheel drive truck to tow about 25 vehicles and to give rides to about 20 people on Tuesday night and Wednesday. He said he had rushed Deer Valley Elementary to pick up his daughter and saw two older women who got stuck while trying to get up a hill. He towed them and never stopped helping until the sun started melting ice Wednesday afternoon.

"There were plenty of close calls, but I managed not to put a scratch on my truck. Maybe I was born to be a tow truck driver," he said.

The governor took to statewide TV Wednesday afternoon to thank people like Denard and called them "snow angels."

The storm shut down roads and schools from Fort Payne to the Florida line.

In Montgomery, Mayor Todd Strange closed all streets Tuesday night and Wednesday morning due to heavy icing. "It came in earlier and a little more robust than we were led to believe," he said.

A spokesman for the Alabama Department of Transportation said workers did not treat Birmingham-area roadways with salt and brine because the line of severe ice was supposed to hit about 100 miles to the south.

"The Birmingham area was not forecast to have that weather," spokesman Tony Harris said. He called it "the worst possible combination" because schools and businesses closed suddenly in the Birmingham area, filling roads with cars as the weather worsened.

The governor said state officials had shifted road equipment to central and south Alabama based on the preliminary forecast and had to make adjustments after the Birmingham area got hit hard. "Unfortunately the predictions were not exactly what we thought they would be," Bentley said.

The National Weather Service acknowledged that initial forecasts did not predict the severe issues in Birmingham. The major snow band was expected to hit farther south, but a revised forecast about an hour before snow started falling Tuesday morning predicted a major impact in Birmingham.

The weather service said it tried to stress the uncertainty in the forecast and that a slight shift in position of the snow band could impact the Birmingham area.

"This system was particularly complex and throughout the event, we communicated the uncertainty of snow totals and impact," the weather service said in a statement.

In Hoover, police said they rescued about 200 people who were stuck overnight in cars on Interstate 65 or I-459 as temperatures fell to near 10 degrees.

John Reagan, the manager of business near U.S. 280 in Birmingham, said he took in about 20 people walking off the iced-over highway in need of shelter.

"We told them we had a space that was warm and available," Reagan said.

On Wednesday, they walked back to their vehicles. But traffic still had miles-long backups because of icy bridges.

There was a bright spot: Electricity stayed on for most people.

Alabama Power, the state's largest electric utility, reported no problems in central and south Alabama. Alabama Power and other utilities reported about 21,000 customers without power in south Alabama at the height of the storm, but that was reduced to less than 1,000 by Wednesday afternoon, mostly in the Dothan areas. Most of those were supposed to have power by Thursday morning, officials said.

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Alabama troopers say 5 traffic fatalities possibly weather related

The Associated Press

January 29, 2014

WETUMPKA (AP) — State troopers have identified five people killed in traffic accidents that they say may have been weather-related.

Two people were killed at 11:35 a.m. Tuesday when a pickup and a train collided two miles north of Cottondale. Troopers identified the victims as 57-year-old Charles Kelly Meiklejohn of Gulf Shores and 39-year-old Nahum Terrance Mickles of Foley.

They say 29-year-old Tyrell Harris of Wetumpka and his 2-year-old son, Rayne Harris, were killed shortly before 8 a.m. Tuesday in a seven-vehicle collision on Alabama 14 west of Wetumpka. Troopers say their preliminary investigation indicates ice on a bridge was a factor.

A two-vehicle crash about 11 a.m. Tuesday in Perry County killed one of the drivers, 64-year-old Emma Evans of Birmingham. The accident occurred 12 miles north of Marion on Alabama Highway 5.

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11,000 students spent night in Ala. public schools

The Associated Press

January 29, 2014

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) - A spokesman for the state Department of Education says about 11,000 students spent Tuesday night at Alabama public schools.

Most of those were in the Birmingham area. Spokesman Michael Sibley says about 1,600 students remained at schools as of 2 p.m. Wednesday.

He says there are plans to get most of them home by Wednesday evening, but some students will have to spend a second night at school.

The students became stranded Tuesday when school buses couldn't get them home and parents couldn't drive to the schools.

At some schools, volunteers used four-wheel-drive vehicles to carry students and faculty home Wednesday. Law enforcement officers also carried students to their homes.

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Gov. Bentley discusses storm aftermath

The Associated Press

January 29, 2014

BIRMINGHAM — Gov. Robert Bentley says highway equipment had been shifted to central and south Alabama based on forecasts for the winter storm and adjustments had to be made after the Birmingham area got hit hard.

The National Weather Service says its initial forecast did not predict severe issues in Birmingham, but it revised the forecast about an hour before snow started falling Tuesday.

Bentley flew over the Birmingham area Tuesday afternoon and saw thousands of abandoned and wrecked cars. He praised volunteers who used four-wheel drive vehicles to help stranded motorists and called them "snow angels." He also praised teachers for staying overnight with several thousand students who had to sleep in their schools.

State helicopters flew over the Birmingham area, but found no stranded motorists who hadn't received help.

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Doctor walks six miles in snow to perform life-saving brain surgery at Trinity Medical Center

Al.com

January 29, 2014

Mike Oliver

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama -- Dr. Zenko Hryniw was at Brookwood Medical Center Tuesday morning when he was needed for emergency brain surgery at Trinity Medical Center.

The problem was the sudden snowstorm had locked down traffic, and the neurosurgeon didn't get farther than a few blocks.

"The cell service was bad so we were fading in and out," said Steve Davis, charge nurse in the neuro intensive care unit at Trinity. "At one point, I heard him say, 'I'm walking.'"

Davis had alerted authorities, and they were looking for him. There were supposed sightings, but no one could find him.

"The police were looking for him," Davis said.

Hours had gone by since the initial contact in the morning.

"He finally called me and said where's the patient? What's the status?" Davis said. "He spoke to the family and went off to surgery."

It was an emergency surgery for a traumatic brain injury. Hryniw is Trinity's only brain surgeon, Davis said.

"Without the surgery, the patient would have most likely died," Davis said. "But he is doing well."

Davis said he and colleagues at Trinity were estimating the hike to the Montclair Road hospital at about eight miles, although Google Maps puts it at about six. The extreme weather Tuesday has been blamed for five deaths statewide and it stranded untold thousands away from their homes.

"This just speaks volumes to the dedication of the man," Davis said. "When I saw him, all I could say is 'you are a good man.'"

Davis said Hryniw takes good care of himself and frequently walks for exercise.

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Weather keeps local legislators from state session

Gadsden Times

January 29, 2014

Andy Powell

Legislators have immunity from arrest traveling to a legislative session, but two members of Etowah County's delegation learned they don't have immunity from weather events like Tuesday's snow.

Rep. Mack Butler, R-Rainbow City, trying to get to Montgomery, was stranded overnight on an interstate and at a gas station in Birmingham.

Rep. Becky Nordgren, R-Gadsden, made it back to Gadsden, but had to hike up Lookout Mountain with her family.

Butler left for Montgomery about 10 a.m. Tuesday. The House of Representatives was to meet at 1 p.m., plus he had a meeting scheduled with Speaker Mike Hubbard, R-Auburn, at 12:30 p.m.

He got as far as the Alabaster exit on Interstate 65, but turned around because the weather was worsening.

Butler's efforts to get home hit a standstill at the intersection of Interstates 65 and 459, where he spent about 12 hours. "Me and about 10,000 of my closest friends," he said, jokingly. "We would literally move 20 feet in an hour."

About midnight, Alabama State Troopers came by on foot and asked motorists to move over to allow a car with an infant to get through. That enabled him to move up about 100 feet.

"All these cars were abandoned on the shoulder, you couldn't use the shoulder," Butler said. "As they did that, it got me to where I could see the on ramp for I-459."

No one was going that way, so he took that route and was on I-459, making it to the intersection of U.S. Highway 280, where a major wreck shut down traffic. He went the wrong way up an on ramp, as other drivers had done.

"280 looked like an apocalypse zombie scene, all the tractor trailers everywhere, cars everywhere in the median," Butler said, "but I was able to finagle and move around them."

He got to a gas station near The Summit that was crowded with people sleeping in cars or sleeping in the store.

He stayed three or four hours, leaving about 6 a.m. He got to Interstate 59 and had relatively clear sailing until he got to Etowah County.

"Our roads were a solid sheet of snow and ice," he said.

Butler got home about 8:30 a.m. and said he planned to help the sheriff's department as a reserve deputy like he does in emergencies.

"I feel really blessed rather than being slightly inconvenienced," he said of his experience. "To be honest, I didn't mind."

Nordgren said she left Gadsden about 9:20 a.m. Tuesday. She turned around at Trussville, as the weather worsened.

She said she looked in her rear-view mirror and saw her husband trailing her. He was working construction in Trussville.

They were able to pick up their daughter from school, but were unable to get up Lookout Mountain.

So, after changing from her dress to jeans in a doughnut shop, she and her family hiked up the mountain along with her luggage, computers and purse.

Nordgren said when they got to the top of the mountain, a couple in a four-wheel drive wagon gave them a ride part of the way home. Wednesday, someone gave her husband a ride as he walked back down the mountain to get his truck.

"People have been just great," she said.

Nordgren said she was most concerned about her father, who had day surgery Tuesday at Callahan Eye Institute in Birmingham. Her sister took him there early Tuesday morning, and as they got ready to leave about 1 p.m. after being discharged, they were stranded and had to spend the night in the institute's lobby.

She said her dad and sister were returning to Gadsden Wednesday morning, adding, "I've got a meal cooked for them."

State Sen. Phil Williams, R-Rainbow City, said he left early enough to make it to Montgomery and attend Tuesday's session, but on Wednesday he was iced in at his hotel.

House Minority Leader Rep. Craig Ford, D-Gadsden, got to Montgomery on Tuesday before the bad weather hit.

He said the Democratic leadership had a meeting, but the full House did not meet because there was not a quorum.

"I was very fortunate. I was one of the ones that was OK and safe. There was a lot of people stranded on the side of the highway," Ford said.

Ford said he came back to Birmingham Tuesday and spent the night with friends. He said with a four-wheel drive vehicle, they were able to help some people that were stranded.

Ford got back to Gadsden on Wednesday and planned to return to Montgomery today.

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School Rescues, Sleeping in Cars Among Storm Tales

The Associated Press

January 29, 2014

They crept through traffic that makes an ordinary Atlanta rush hour feel like a drag race, trudged home through ice and snow while watching cars skid and slide through intersections and spent the night taking care of young children stranded at school. Some even slept in their cars.

The winter storm that blasted Georgia and Alabama on Tuesday caught many people behind the wheel, at work or at school before they could make it home. Getting through it would test their patience, their endurance and perhaps even their character.

Here are the stories of a few who braved the cold that virtually shut down the South.

Jessica Troy's commute home from work took more than half a day. She described it as driving a slow-motion obstacle course on sheets of ice.

On Interstate 285 that circles Atlanta's perimeter, drivers Tuesday evening had to veer around cars abandoned in traffic and tractor-trailers skidded on the ice and wound up blocking multiple lanes. And everything seemed to move at the slowest pace imaginable.

"We literally would go 5 feet and sit for two hours," Troy said after she and a co-worker who rode with her finally made it home just after 10:30 a.m. Wednesday.

They spent more than 16 hours in the car together. Their total trip was about 12 miles.

Troy said they left the advertising agency where they work at 6 p.m. Tuesday. Roads were still clogged with drivers who tried to rush home after lunch as the ice storm hit.

The standstill traffic gave Troy plenty of time to call her parents and send text messages to friends, letting them know she was OK. By 3 a.m. her car was stuck on a freeway entrance ramp. She put it in park, left the heat running and tried to get some sleep.

"I slept for an hour and it was not comfortable," Troy said. "Most people sat the entire night with no food, no water, no bathroom. We saw people who had children. It was a dire situation."

After daybreak a few good Samaritans appeared, going car-to-car and handing out bottles of water and cookies. Traffic started moving again at about 8:30. The rest of the trip took about two hours.

Troy had enough time to shower, eat and grab an hourlong nap before starting her workday Wednesday morning. Fortunately, she was able to telecommute on her laptop.

"I jumped back into working," she said. "But I was so glad to be home, I don't even care."

DeKalb County police had their hands full as the winter storm hit metro Atlanta, with seemingly nonstop 911 calls coming in from drivers stuck on icy roads and reports of crashes. So when word came that students were stranded at Peachtree Middle School because driving conditions were too hazardous for their parents to get them, police Chief Cedric Alexander dispatched himself to give some of them a ride home.

Alexander said he had four children pile into his truck, as many as he could safely carry. Then he pulled onto Interstate 285, a typically busy commuter route where bumper-to-bumper traffic now inched along over treacherous patches of ice.

It took three hours. But the chief personally saw each of the young students safely home to their families. Alexander said the looks of relief he saw on the faces of parents at their front doors told him he'd made the right call.

"I just felt that it was the right thing to do even though I had oversight of this whole county and public safety," Alexander said. "I just knew I couldn't leave those kids there."

The snow and ice caused classes to be dismissed early at Roswell High School outside Atlanta. But 15-year-old Camden Donahoe got tired of waiting as students spent hours in the school gym biding their time until buses navigating the slippery roads could pick them up to go home.

So Camden and a friend who normally takes the same bus struck out on foot through the snow.

"We figured our parents would be less worried if we just walked," Camden said.

The teenagers hiked for several miles through bitter cold. But they seemed to be faring better than many who were trying to make it home by car.

"It was pretty bad out, the roads were really icy," Camden said. "Cars were spinning out at one of the big intersections we went to."

He made it home in about an hour with his hooded sweater, blue jeans and tennis shoes all wet. Camden figured he beat the school bus. He walked the same route the bus always takes, but never saw it drive past him.

In Alabama, Republican state Rep. Mack Butler of Rainbow City spent Tuesday night sleeping in his truck at a gas station off Interstate 459 in Birmingham. Butler said he was headed to Montgomery for a meeting of the Alabama House, but he gave up on what is normally a two-hour trip south because interstate highways became impassable with ice and hundreds of wrecked and abandoned vehicles.

"It looked like the zombie apocalypse," he said.

Butler said he had plenty of company at the gas station. "The whole lot was full of people. It was really a safe, secure refuge where you saw signs of life," he said.

Butler's troubles were shared by other legislators. Only 40 of the 102 House members showed up Tuesday afternoon, which was too few to meet. The House canceled Wednesday's meeting and will try again Thursday when warmer temperatures are expected to melt the ice on highways.

Peachtree Road in Atlanta is normally bustling during rush hour. Not Wednesday morning, as ice still clung to the road. The few drivers who were commuting to work inched cautiously through traffic lights. Others decided to walk to work.

Rob Syverston, on the other hand, made the 20-mile trip from his home in the northern suburbs to downtown Atlanta on his four-wheel all-terrain vehicle. He was giving his neighbor, a surgical nurse, a lift to work at Piedmont Hospital.

"Her group had heart surgery this morning," Syverston said. "They had a lot of work to do on a patient."

Syverston dropped his neighbor off at the hospital and grabbed some breakfast before heading home.

Syverston and a friend who also rides an ATV had been trying to help out as best they could since the storm hit. He said they had spent up to eight hours Monday assisting stranded drivers and helping salt roads near their homes.

"It's been that kind of a day," he said.

Mike Styles was headed to Atlanta from his home in suburban Acworth when snow started falling Tuesday. Recalling the last winter storm that paralyzed the city in 2011, he didn't like the way things looked.

But he by no means took the day off. A school bus got into a wreck near his home, so Styles hopped in his Hummer and helped give rides to the children on board. Then he helped some friends get their own children home.

By sundown he was giving rides home to stranded strangers, and kept that up until about 2 a.m. Wednesday. After catching a few hours of sleep, Styles hit the road again by 8 a.m. to bring snacks, water and diapers to stranded motorists. As blogs and Facebook groups for stranded motorists popped up, he coordinated efforts to help them as a friend of his drove. Styles estimated Wednesday he had taken about 25 people home and had arranged help for a couple dozen more.

"As long as you take it slow and you're not stupid, you're not speeding around, it's really not too bad," said Styles, a 37-year-old New York native.

At Deer Valley Elementary School in Hoover, Ala., second-grade teacher Lindsey Calton Nichols and her co-workers cared for 200 students overnight because the roads were too icy for school buses to travel. They watched movies, slept on gym mats with coats for blankets, and ate sausage biscuits and fresh strawberries for breakfast.

"There were no tears," Nichols said. "The kids were actually having lots of fun."

Volunteers with four-wheel drive trucks carried students home throughout the night and morning. Her husband spent the night with their 2-year-old son at a nearby child care center. A volunteer they had never met gave them a ride home around 11 a.m. Wednesday, along with the last student Nichols had left in her class.

Lisa Nadir left her job just north of Atlanta at about 1 p.m. Tuesday, hoping to make the drive home to Acworth before nightfall. Her 35-mile commute usually takes about 45 minutes.

Twelve hours later, at about 1 a.m. Wednesday, an exhausted Nadir pulled into a grocery store parking lot and tried to sleep. She was just 15 miles from where she started. After a mostly sleepless night, she walked into a nearby Waffle House restaurant.

"There's a good Samaritan at the Waffle House who has every kind of phone charger imaginable and he's letting people use them," Nadir said.

By midday Wednesday, a crowd of about 60 people had gathered at the Waffle House. Some ate. Others just looked out at the streets coated with a glassy layer of ice.

Bruce Forbes traveled from Alberta, Canada, for a weeklong convention on animal proteins in downtown Atlanta. Seeing how locals reacted to a couple of inches of snow baffled him.

"It was astounding to me that that little amount of snow can shut everything down," he said.

Forbes left the convention center Tuesday afternoon and walked to a taxi stand where about 20 others were waiting. When he finally got into a cab about half an hour later, it took nearly two hours to get to his midtown hotel 3 miles away. The cab driver told Forbes he'd only seen snow once before.

"I offered to drive because I figured it might be safer, since I'm used to it," Forbes said.

The driver declined his offer.

Georgia and Georgia Tech stuck with plans for home games against Vanderbilt and North Carolina, respectively. Georgia in Athens, Tech in Atlanta.

Planned TV coverage for each game was scrapped due to travel concerns for production trucks and crews. Georgia offered free streaming of its game on —www.georgiadogs.com .

Associated Press writers Christina A. Cassidy in Clarkston, Ga.; Phillip Lucas, Johnny Clark and Kate Brumback in Atlanta; and Philip Rawls in Montgomery, Ala., contributed to this report.

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Alabama Gov. Robert Bentley visits Glen Iris Elementary, thanks teachers for caring for stranded students

Al.com

January 29, 2014

Stan Diel

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama - In the wake of a winter storm that iced roads left more than 11,000 students stranded in schools overnight, Alabama Gov. Robert Bentley visited Birmingham's Glen Iris Elementary Wednesday to commend the teachers who stayed with those stranded students Tuesday night.

"This is something that nobody expected," he said of the storm.

"Everybody's done extremely well," Bentley said to the teachers. "You just have to improvise, and when emergency situations come up, you just have to make sure people are taken care of, and that's exactly what y'all did."

Bentley said he'd heard from Alabama State Schools Superintendent Tommy Bice that around 4,000 students had been housed in schools overnight. Superintendent Bice later revised that calculation - those earlier numbers mistakenly left out Hoover and Shelby County schools, which housed the majority of students in the state. In all, 11,375 students spent the night in area schools.

Bentley gave all the students still remaining at the school pins in the shape of Alabama, and asked what they'd been doing during their stay at the school. A young girl explained they had eaten, played in the gym, sang on the stage, and played hide-and-go-seek and other games.

"Y'all have done so much work around here, I think you ought to get to take off three or four days," Bentley said. The lighthearted comment was directed to the elementary school students at Bentley's feet, but the teachers gathered behind him (and who had stayed with the students overnight) in the school's media room seemed the most supportive. They clapped and cheered.

"They need to give y'all a vacation," Bentley said, laughing. "I agree with you."

Glen Iris Principal Mike Wilson told Bentley that about 100 of the school's 900 students were stuck at the school Tuesday afternoon, but that number dwindled to about 30 by Tuesday night.

"We had parents walking, and quite a ways," Wilson said. "Parents had left their cars in Five Points up here, on the freeway, and walked and got their children. I had a parent who came today on an ATV, so it's been amazing."

"The teachers have been amazing," Wilson said. "Anything I asked, anything I needed."

At the school, Bentley conferred briefly with Birmingham Mayor William Bell on state and city efforts to recover from the storm. Bentley told Bell that state law enforcement resources would be used to protect abandoned cars from burglary and theft.

Bell said the city was preparing for tonight, when the temperatures drop to extreme lows again.

"The ice is going to reform, and we've got to go back and resand everything again," Bell said. He was thankful for state work clearing state roads, easing stress on the city-operated tributary roads.

"We're hopeful we won't have a repeat [of yesterday's traffic problems] this evening. In fact we're making sure that we don't."

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That awkward moment when only one Representative shows up at the State House

Yellowhammer News

January 29, 2014

Cliff Sims

Just like the rest of us, the weather put the Alabama legislature in quite a predicament this week. When the House of Representatives adjourned last Thursday, they agreed to reconvene the following Tuesday, as is their standard procedure. The time they chose just so happened to land right at the beginning of a day-long period of inclement weather across much of the state.

The Senate barely managed to get a quorum on Tuesday and passed roughly twenty bills.

But only about 40 members of the House made it to Montgomery on Tuesday, leaving them 12 short of a quorum. House rules state that if a quorum is not met, the House will reconvene every day at 10 a.m. until it is. Considering they're only allowed 30 legislative days each year, nobody wants to burn a legislative day.

Well, Mark Twain probably wouldn't mind...

Mark Twain

...But by the time Wednesday rolled around, Snowmageddon 2014 was in full effect.

"We can plan for many things, but the weather is not one of them," House Speaker Mike Hubbard said. "As important as our legislative obligations are, at times like these, safety is our number one priority. The moment the weather permits, however, we will be back to conducting the people's business and fulfilling our commitment to Alabama taxpayers."

In other parts of the state, motorists were stranded on busy highways and thousands of kids, teachers and workers were forced to spend the night at their schools and offices.

State Rep. Mack Butler, R-Rainbow City, was stuck on I-65 for over 20 hours.

Mack

Other members of the legislature couldn't make it to the State House, but tried to lend a helping hand to folks in their district.

But Rep. Greg Wren, R-Montgomery, decided he was going to work no matter what.

And for the first time in history — at least according to the few folks around Montgomery we talked to — only one representative answered the quorum call.

Rep. Greg Wren, R-Montgomery, was the only member of the House present on Wednesday
Rep. Greg Wren, R-Montgomery, was the only member of the House present on Wednesday

The House was called to order; Rep. Wren said a prayer for his colleagues and others around the state being impacted by the weather; House Public Information Director Clay Redden led the Pledge of Allegiance; Redden acknowledged a quorum wasn't present, and the House was adjourned.

“My colleagues had to stay at home to care for their constituents and families,” Wren told Yellowhammer. “It’s an honor to have their backs. I’m sure they would do the same for me.”

Both chambers of the legislature are scheduled to reconvene at 10 a.m. Thursday morning and are expected to have enough members present to get a quorum.

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RSA meeting to discuss Bronner's role canceled

Times Daily

January 29, 2014

Mary Sell

MONTGOMERY — A Retirement Systems of Alabama board meeting scheduled for Thursday to discuss CEO David Bronner's role in making the state retiree fund's investments has been canceled.

According to an email to board members late last week, the meeting was canceled at the request of board Vice Chairwoman Jackie Graham to "allow more time to work with the investment procedures committee and RSA staff on the investment policy."

Employees' Retirement System board member Steve Williams said Wednesday he hasn't been told of a new meeting date. The employees' retirement system board's next regular meeting is in March.

Thursday's meeting was supposed to iron out the details related to a resolution approved by the board in December. It said RSA's three-member investment committee should "independently consider all investment recommendations made by (Bronner) and independently decide whether to approve or disapprove each investment recommendation."

For decades, that approval has been done by proxy, and committee members reviewed the investments later, but board members have questioned the legality of that under state law. Bronner said requiring pre-approval would slow the process and hurt RSA.

The change is supposed to go into effect Saturday, but its finer points have yet to be worked out. Graham is the state's personnel director. Most of state government was shut down Wednesday because of the weather, and Graham could not be reached at her office.

Similarly, phones at RSA weren't answered.

Some, including north Alabama Democratic lawmakers, said the board's vote last month was an attack on Bronner and a Republican grab for the billions of dollars RSA controls. Others, including Gov. Robert Bentley, dispute that claim. Bentley, the official chairman of the board, said he knew nothing about the resolution beforehand but supports it.

Some Republican Statehouse leaders have said they want more information about RSA's investments, which are partially funded by taxpayers.

In 2012, The Pew Charitable Trust said the long-term liabilities of the retirement system were cause "for serious concern." In 2010, the system was about 70 percent funded and had a \$13 billion funding gap, Pew reported.

A retirement system should be at least 80 percent funded, Pew said. That same year, Mississippi was 64 percent funded; Georgia was 85 percent; Tennessee was 90 percent, and Florida was 82 percent.

The Employees' Retirement System is a roughly \$10 billion fund; the Teachers' Retirement System is at nearly \$20 billion. In 2012, RSA paid out more than \$2 billion in benefits to retirees. Those benefits are funded through employee contributions, state contributions and investment returns.

According the Legislative Fiscal Office, state contributions have risen significantly in the past 10 years. In the employees' system, state contributions increased from \$46 million in 2002 to \$152 million in 2012. In the teachers' system, the increase was from \$266 million to \$621 million.

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After two years of inaction, House passes \$1 trillion farm bill

Al.com

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Kyle Whitmire

WASHINGTON -- After two years of partisan deadlock, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a comprehensive farm bill today that includes a basket full of programs, including funding for food stamps, foreign aid and subsidies for American farmers.

The bill authorizes almost \$1 trillion in spending over the next 10 years, but it contains cuts to many programs. Estimates vary as to how much the new bill will save, with projections ranging from \$16.6 billion to \$23 billion in savings over the next 10 years.

All seven of Alabama's representatives voted for the bill, which Congress must renew every five years and has been overdue for more than a year. Support for the bill, which passed 251-166, was bipartisan.

"After three years of hard work, today the House finally passed a Farm Bill that provides certainty for our nation's farmers and institutes money-saving reforms to agriculture and nutrition policy that we've needed for some time," Rep. Martha Roby, R-Montgomery, said.

The bill will make cuts to several programs, including food stamps – known as Supplementary Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP – and what's known as "direct payment" to farmers.

Direct payment has been a political target of President Barack Obama and fiscally conservative Republicans, alike. In essence, the program, which costs about \$5 billion per year, has paid farmers whether they grew crops or not.

The new farm bill ends that practice, and shifts some of that funding to subsidized insurance programs and disaster relief for farmers.

Supporters of the change argued that the new bill rewards farmers who grow crops and weeds out freeloaders who do nothing for a government check.

The bill also cuts food stamp funding by about 1 percent, or \$8 billion over 10 years.

Some Republicans had sought deeper cuts to SNAP and the issue had been a sticking point during negotiations.

Alabama's lone Democratic representative, Rep. Terri Sewell, lamented the cuts to food stamps, but said she supported the compromise.

"While I am disappointed that this legislation doesn't invest new resources in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, I voted for this bill because it strikes a compromise that provides a 5 year agreement that gives our farmers and consumers the certainty they deserve," she said in a press release after the vote Wednesday.

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Editorial: Giving chief examiner's duties to state auditor is worth considering

Montgomery Advertiser

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Quick, name the state auditor of Alabama. No peeking on Google.

If you can do it, you're in a small group, as Alabamians seldom hear much about this constitutional office and have heard next to nothing in the near-silent tenure of the current auditor (dramatic pause as the answer is revealed) — Samantha Shaw.

That is not to say that Shaw has not done her job; she has. However, Alabamians are well justified in asking whether an expansion of the office's responsibilities would be a good idea, and whether the people would be better served by having critical auditing functions in the hands of an individual they elect, rather than one named by a committee of the Legislature and thus at least potentially beholden to that body.

The state auditor's work consists largely of property audits, keeping track of all the stuff the state owns — cars, computers, furnishings, office equipment, etc. — that is valued at more than \$500. That is not unimportant, of course; the taxpayers have a right to expect that the property their tax money purchases for state use is properly accounted for.

However, the really serious auditing work, the sort of auditing that could uncover improprieties in expenditures or contracts or detect other forms of official misuse, falls to the state Department of Examiners of Public Accounts, under the direction of the chief examiner.

Under current law, the chief examiner is appointed by the Legislature's Committee on Public Accounts for a seven-year term. He or she may be reappointed as many times as the committee chooses. The current chief examiner, Ronald Jones, has held the job since 1982.

The chief examiner's "actions shall be supervised and controlled" by the committee. That's not empty language; the committee has considerable power. It can remove the chief examiner through impeachment proceedings it is empowered to institute. In fact, any group of at least 15 legislators can bring charges and start the impeachment process.

A bill by Rep. Ed Henry, R-Decatur, would place the department within the auditor's office. The auditor would "perform the duties and assume the authority of the Chief Examiner," the bill states.

We think there's a lot to be said for this approach. The auditor is elected by the people in a statewide vote, not hand-picked by a committee of the Legislature. An auditor who performed poorly, who failed to fairly but aggressively examine the stewardship of the taxpayers' money, would have to answer to the voters.

Changing the responsibilities of one of the state's constitutional offices is not something to be done casually, but in this case it makes a lot of sense.

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Rep. Robert Aderholt named to House Appropriation's Defense Subcommittee

Al.com

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An Alabama lawmaker has been named to the U.S. House subcommittee that sets spending levels for the military.

On Wednesday, Rep. Robert Aderholt, R-Haleyville, was named to the House Appropriations Committee's Defense Subcommittee. The subcommittee, currently chaired by Rep. Rodney Frelinghuysen, R-NJ, sets annual appropriation levels and has spending oversight for the Departments of Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines, as well as the Central Intelligence Agency.

Aderholt, whose district includes Morgan, Cullman and Marshall counties, said the position will allow him to convey the unique role the state plays in national defense.

"Given the history of working with Redstone Arsenal over the years I have seen first-hand the important role northern Alabama and the entire state plays in our national defense, particularly as

it relates to missile defense," Aderholt said. "This is particularly important as the Department of Defense continues to transition to meet new threats."

Aderholt is currently in his ninth term representing the Fourth Congressional District. He also serves as chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture.

Describing Aderholt as a "strong believer in fiscal responsibility," Frelinghuysen said he was confident Aderholt would work to "ensure that our men and women in uniform, and their families, have everything they need.

"I look forward to working with him on the subcommittee to improve military readiness and by making every dollar of defense spending count."