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FULL TEXT

Some already working at Alabama's new Remington plant, VP says, more jobs available on rolling basis

Al.com

July 28, 2014

Kathryn Jacoby

A skeleton crew of 10 is already hard at work at Huntsville's new Remington manufacturing plant, said VP of corporate finance and planning, Corry Doyle.

Approximately 35 individuals have already been hired to work at the facility, including 14 engineers, 10 people in operations, and 11 in support staff including finance and HR, Doyle told a crowd at the Economic Development Association of Alabama's summer 2014 conference.

Another 10 individuals are currently enrolled in a training program with AIDT, Alabama Industrial Development Training, which is providing pre-employment screening and training to Remington as part of an incentive valued at \$15.9 million. Once they make it through the AIDT program, Remington's Huntsville plant will have 45 employees on staff in total.

It's definitely not too late to apply-- in fact, most of the manufacturing jobs haven't even been posted yet. Hiring will continue on a rolling basis, Doyle said. Those interested in jobs should check frequently for open ads.

Remington announced in February 2014 it would be opening a \$110M, 843,000 square feet firearms manufacturing facility near the Huntsville International Airport. The facility will likely have a modern look to it, Doyle said in a speech congratulating Alabama on "doing what it takes to win." Alabama was chosen over 27 other states vying for the plant.

Operations at the facility, which previously housed Chrysler and Continental Automotive, are expected to begin full time in 2015 once upgrades and renovations are complete. About 2,000 new jobs are expected to be available at Remington, making it the third-largest private employer in Madison County.

In May, Remington officials confirmed the Huntsville facility will manufacture the Bushmaster and R1 semiautomatic pistol lines, which were previously made at the company's Ilion, NY facility. The company will also move six subsidiary operations from throughout the country to Alabama.

Limestone and Morgan County officials have said that landing Remington was a "regional effort" and that the impact in Madison county and for the state will be "huge."

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Gov. Bentley still considering special session for Alabama economic development incentives

Al.com

July 28, 2014

Michael Tomberlin

POINT CLEAR, Alabama – Gov. Robert Bentley said he is still considering a special session to address economic development incentives but only if he has a consensus from legislative leadership and a there is a clear plan for the session.

Speaking at the Economic Development Association of Alabama's Summer 2014 Conference at the Grand Hotel, Bentley said he has tasked Alabama Commerce Secretary Greg Canfield with determining what is needed in the way of new incentives and identifying funding options.

In an interview after his talk, Bentley said the state is moving closer to the \$750 million cap in the bond issue dollars for economic development the state approved through Amendment 666 in 2000. That's even after the state freed up \$160 million with some refinancing approved in another amendment in 2012.

Bentley was criticized last week for saying a proposed special session would consider using money in the state's Education Trust Fund for economic development incentives.

Today, Bentley did not say the ETF would be off limits, but did say any proposed plan would have to be a net gain for the fund.

"I will never take money out of the Education Trust Fund," Bentley said. "Anything I will do will put more money into the Education Trust Fund."

Earlier in the day at the conference, Robert Boehringer, senior manager of KPMG, said Alabama is falling behind other southern states in its incentives for both new and existing industry.

Since Alabama took its spot at the top of the incentives mountain in 1994 with the successful recruitment of Mercedes-Benz in Vance, other states have become competitive and even overtaken Alabama in the incentives offered.

Boehringer said other states are more creative with their incentives – from the way they collect corporate taxes to their use of non-statutory, or discretionary, incentives.

A ranking of the state's statutory incentives packages put Alabama at 19th in the nation while neighboring states Georgia and Mississippi ranked in the Top Five. Louisiana and Arkansas also ranked higher than Alabama.

When it comes to incentives available for existing industries, Alabama now ranks 13th and has been steadily giving up ground to competing states, Boehringer said.

Boehringer awarded "helmet stickers" like a football coach would award players when scoring the different economic development incentives states offer. Louisiana's nearly full playbook earned it several more helmet stickers than Alabama.

"I think you as Alabama need some more helmet stickers" when it comes to incentives, he said.

He suggested Alabama create new, better incentives and then reach out to companies to market what's different – in much the way a store would promote a sale or new merchandise.

Despite any identified need for more incentives, tapping the ETF will not be a popular move, if an online poll at AL.com is any indication. The poll asking, "Do you support using state education dollars to pay the cost of recruiting industry into Alabama?" had 86.81 percent of people voting against it as of this afternoon.

Bentley said he will wait to see what incentives plan the Department of Commerce proposes and if and when a special session is needed. But he said he believes something needs to be done for Alabama to continue to compete for the big projects that bring jobs and capital investment to the state.

"We need to be Number One in everything we do," Bentley said. "Our goal is always to be the best. We want to be the best at workforce development and recruitment."

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Why does Alabama struggle to fund government? Bentley says education gets growth taxes

Al.com

July 28, 2014

Brendan Kirby

ORANGE BEACH, Alabama – A week after receiving a decidedly cool reception to his idea of using education funds to help pay for economic incentives for new industry, Gov. Robert Bentley again dipped his toe into the water of budget reform.

Bentley said at an appearance in Washington County on Wednesday that he intended to call a special session of the Legislature after the November election to rework the way the state pays for incentives to lure new businesses. He said the Education Trust Fund reaps most of the benefits when businesses relocate to Alabama but incurs none of the costs.

By the end of the day Wednesday, Bentley already had backed off the idea of a special session, calling it a "trial balloon."

In an address to the annual convention of the Alabama Sheriffs' Association on Monday, though, Bentley noted the General Fund – which pays for prisons, law enforcement and other government programs – derives its funding largely from stagnant revenue sources.

The Education Trust Fund, meanwhile, gets its revenue mainly from growth taxes, like the income and sales levies.

"Almost every bit of it goes into education," he said. "Now I'm all for education. But we do need to have some way to fund the General Fund."

Bentley did not offer a detailed proposal for what changes he would like to see.

Bentley, who devoted most of his speech to Alabama's prison problem, touched on a number of other issues:

Government efficiency.

- The governor said that the state is moving toward a uniform information technology system. Every department and every public university will share the same IT system, saving \$650 million over the next five years, he said. "We're changing government. I'm not going to be a caretaker governor," he said

Immigration.

- Bentley said he does not expect Maxwell Air Force Base to host any of the Central American children who have streamed across the U.S. border in recent months.

"I've been assured that will not take place without my being notified, and I have not been notified," he said. "We can't take in the whole world. We can't. Everybody would like to come to America. Nobody's trying to go to Guatemala."

Disaster response.

- Bentley said he has had to deal with perhaps the highest number of natural disasters as any governor in the country, highlighted by the devastating 2011 tornadoes that killed dozens of people.

"I have been become the natural disaster governor of the country – not by choice," he said.

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Audit: Area VA staff ordered to change wait times

Montgomery Advertiser

July 28, 2014

Mary Troyan

WASHINGTON – More than half the staff surveyed at Central Alabama Veterans Health Care System say they were instructed to change the dates of when a veteran asked for an appointment, according to an internal Veterans Affairs' audit.

By altering the date of the appointment request, a VA hospital or clinic can mask how long veterans have to wait to see a health care provider.

The unethical practice has been found at dozens of veterans' health facilities around the country, including CAVHCS, and investigations are underway.

The data released Monday by the VA to members of Congress is the first look at how common the practice is in each facility.

The VA surveyed thousands of employees at more than 900 VA health care sites over five days in May, just as the wait time scandal was developing.

In that survey, 57 percent at the Montgomery-based VA reported receiving “instruction” from their facility to enter a date other than the date the veteran first asked for the appointment. Nationally, it was 13 percent.

“This audit shows what we’ve suspected for some time: that the rampant scheduling manipulation in Central Alabama wasn’t some misunderstanding, but rather a facility-led, standard operating procedure. And compared to other peer systems, Central Alabama’s numbers are off the charts,” said Rep. Martha Roby, R-Montgomery.

Roby, who has been critical of CAVHCS director James Talton, said the survey backs up what she’s been hearing from whistleblowers contacting her office about wrongdoing. The audit says staff on the Montgomery campus were told verbally — in training and by supervisors — to record the next available appointment date as the date that the veteran requested.

“Evidence suggests that schedule manipulation isn’t an accident at CAVHCS; it’s an outcome expected by the administration,” she said through a spokesman.

But even with manipulated dates, CAVHCS has been cited for unusually long wait times. In June, the VA reported that in central Alabama, veterans wait an average of at least two months to see a primary care doctor, specialist or mental health professional for the first time.

CAVHCS, which includes medical centers in Montgomery and Tuskegee, is one of 112 facilities that the VA has referred to its Office of Inspector General for further investigation.

VA officials are briefing congressional delegations this week about the issue of access in their local VA facilities. The data on Montgomery shows the facility has a worse problem than many other VA health centers in the region. For example, 9 percent of the staff at the Birmingham VA reported being told to change request dates for appointments, and it was about 17 percent in Tuscaloosa.

It also showed that one of the obstacles to getting veterans appointments more quickly is staffing. Asked to rank on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 equals never and 5 equals always) how often a lack of appointment slots for a health care provider affects a veteran’s access to timely care, CAVHCS staff ranked it 4.3. The national average was 3.0, and Tuscaloosa was 2.3.

CAVHCS also gave itself the lowest customer service rating in the Southeastern region. Facilities in Atlanta, Augusta, Birmingham, Charleston, Columbia, Dublin and Tuscaloosa gave themselves an average of 3.8, with 5 meaning excellent and 1 meaning poor. CAVHCS staff rated itself at 2.7.

The VA audit also cites a specific concern on the Montgomery campus of CAVHCS of schedulers using unofficial paper wait lists instead of computerized appointment tracking, which is against VA policy.

Talton last month told Roby that three employees involved in manipulating the wait time data had been reassigned.

Efforts to reach a spokeswoman for CAVHCS Monday were unsuccessful.

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EPA to get earful from climate rule friends, foes

Politico

July 28, 2014

Get comfortable.

An estimated 1,600 people are slated to sound off to the Environmental Protection Agency on its proposed climate change rule for existing power plants this week at a series of marathon public hearings.

Scientists, lawmakers, environmentalists and industry officials will line up at the hearings to deliver five-minute statements on the merits or shortfalls of the EPA's plans to cut carbon emissions from the nation's power generators by nearly a third.

The grueling 11-hour sessions, which will be held over two days in Washington, Atlanta, Denver and Pittsburgh, aren't likely to bridge the massive gap between the Republicans and industry groups that hate the rule and the liberals and environmentalists who love it.

(Sign up for POLITICO's Morning Energy tip sheet)

Instead, expect both sides to dig in their heels, polishing off long-standing talking points about how the regulation is likely to either destroy the economy or save the planet.

It's difficult to draw any broad conclusions from the hearings about how the average person feels about the regulation because many of those who will testify are closely associated with groups that have taken stands for or against the proposed carbon restrictions. Environmental and industry groups have hired buses to send members to the hearings in droves. Polls show that the majority of the public supports the rule.

The hearings are shaping up to be something of a spectacle, with many groups planning splashy events aimed at standing out in the crowd.

(Also on POLITICO: Feds approve oil exploration off US Eastern Coast)

The Koch-backed group Americans for Prosperity, for example, is holding rallies in Atlanta and Denver on Tuesday. AFP President Tim Phillips, who will testify at the hearing, will speak at the rally in Atlanta, along with Kentucky Coal Association President Bill Bissett.

Unsurprisingly, the coal industry will have a major presence at the hearings. Officials with the industry group American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity are scheduled to testify at all four hearings, and the Pennsylvania Coal Alliance and the Colorado Mining Association are each

busing miners to the rallies in their states. The United Mine Workers of America is holding a rally in opposition to the rule on Thursday in Pittsburgh.

Meanwhile, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell is slated to speak at Wednesday's hearing in Washington. He'll then hold a news conference with members of the Congressional Coal Caucus and Jimmy Rose, a former coal miner who rose to prominence in conservative circles after singing "Coal Keeps the Lights On" on the reality show "America's Got Talent."

McConnell is facing a tight reelection bid in Kentucky, the nation's third-largest coal producer, and he has emerged as one of the most vocal critics of the rule. He has authored a bill to kill the regulation and he regularly warns in Senate floor speeches that it would destroy the coal industry.

(Also on POLITICO: Full energy and environment policy coverage)

Other lawmakers scheduled to testify at the hearings: Sens. Ed Markey (D-Mass.) and Ben Cardin (D-Md.) and Rep. Shelley Moore Capito, the Republican Senate candidate from West Virginia. After speaking at Tuesday's hearing in Washington, Markey will hold a news conference with Delaware Gov. Jack Markell, a Johns Hopkins University medical professor and representatives from the Latino Victory Project, Green Latinos and the Hip Hop Caucus.

But EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy said Monday she won't be attending any of the hearings. "That would be pretty unprecedented," McCarthy told reporters. "And it's not really about me. It's about listening to people coming in."

And the rhetoric is already heating up.

Rep. Mike Kelly (R-Pa.) compared EPA's tactics to "terrorism" Monday at a Heritage Foundation forum on the EPA.

Kelly paraphrased the infamous words of former EPA regional administrator Al Armendariz, who resigned two years ago after a video showed him saying that his enforcement philosophy was "kind of like how the Romans used to conquer little villages in the Mediterranean. They'd go into a little Turkish town somewhere, they'd find the first five guys they saw and they would crucify them. And then you know that town was really easy to manage for the next few years."

"You talk about terrorism," Kelly said. "You can do it in a lot of different ways."

Greens are also planning events surrounding the hearings.

The Moms Clean Air Force is organizing "play-ins" with moms and their children outside the four hearings this week. The events are aimed at underscoring the public health benefits of the rule, particularly for children.

Environmental groups sought to project a united front in support of the rule ahead of the hearings.

“It’s the biggest step we’ve ever taken against climate change, which today is already harming our health and environment,” Natural Resources Defense Council President Frances Beinecke said on a call with reporters Monday, referring to EPA’s climate rule.

“We can’t wait any longer to protect ourselves and future generations,” Environment America Executive Director Margie Alt added.

Sierra Club Executive Director Michael Brune said he expects “busloads” of the group’s members to attend the hearings. And Beinecke said she expects doctors, farmers and mayors to attend, as well as NRDC members.

While several environmental groups have said they hope to push for improvements to the rule, expect greens to focus on their broad support for the regulation.

“Our focus at these hearings is going to be that this is an absolutely essential step forward,” Beinecke said.

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Pray God blocks EPA plan, chief regulator of Alabama utilities tells consumers

Al.com

July 28, 2014

Stan Diel

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama – Alabama’s coal industry will lose jobs and consumers will see their utility bills increase should the EPA implement proposed regulations on coal-fired power plants, Alabama regulators said at a press conference in which they invoked the name of God in the fight over fossil fuels.

Two members of the Alabama Public Service Commission, a member-elect and an Alabama representative to the Republican National Committee said proposed EPA regulations that aim to reduce power plant carbon emissions by 30 percent represent “an assault on our way of life” and are a purposeful attempt by the Obama administration to kill coal-related jobs.

“We will not stand for what they are doing to our way of life in Alabama,” said PSC President Twinkle Andress Cavanaugh. “We will take our fight to the EPA.”

Cavanaugh and several other Republican leaders from Alabama plan to offer testimony at an EPA hearing in Atlanta on Tuesday.

The EPA announced in June its intent to implement new standards meant to curb carbon emissions from coal-fired power plants. Such emissions are among the biggest contributors to global warming. According to EPA documents, the proposal would require Alabama to lower emissions from its coal-fired plants by 27 percent from 2012 levels.

A spokesman for Alabama Power Co., which has six coal-fired plants in the state, has said it's too soon to know what action the utility would have to take to meet the new standards.

At their news conference today Cavanaugh and PSC commissioner-elect Chip Beeker invoked the name of God in stating their opposition to the EPA proposal. Beeker, a Republican who is running unopposed for a PSC seat, said coal was created in Alabama by God, and the federal government should not enact policy that runs counter to God's plan.

"Who has the right to take what God's given a state?" he said.

Cavanaugh called on the people of the state to ask for God's intervention.

"I hope all the citizens of Alabama will be in prayer that the right thing will be done," she said.

Also speaking in opposition to the EPA plan were PSC Commissioner Jeremy Oden and Paul Reynolds, an Alabama representative to the Republican National Committee.

Oden said he believes the EPA has dramatically underestimated the economic impact that the proposed regulations will have, and that the 600-page proposal represents overreach on the part of the Obama administration. Reynolds said the Obama administration has more important issues with which to contend.

"The Obama administration should be concerned about a potential world at war instead of something dumb, like a war on coal," he said. "What we're dealing with is government run amok."

The press conference was held in the offices of the Alabama Coal Association.

The EPA hearing was to be held Tuesday at the Sam Nunn Atlanta Federal Center but has been relocated to the Omni Hotel because of a power outage.

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Gov. Bentley said EPA 'trying to kill us in the South' with coal emission standards

Al.com

July 28, 2014

Michael Tomberlin

POINT CLEAR, Alabama – Alabama Gov. Robert Bentley said the Environmental Protection Agency's proposed tighter restrictions on coal emissions are "trying to kill us in the South."

EPA regulations that aim to reduce power plant carbon emissions by 30 percent will have a detrimental effect on the state's economy and hurt its efforts to recruit industry by driving the price of energy up, Bentley told those attending the Economic Development Association of Alabama's Summer 2014 Conference.

"What you couldn't do with legislation, you're trying to do with regulation," Bentley said he told an EPA official recently.

Bentley's comments came on the same day other officials publicly criticized the proposed standards.

The governor's talk touched on the need to revamp the state's economic development incentives, expand workforce development initiatives in all levels of schools and even declared the state will build a new hotel and convention center in Gulf Shores.

Bentley said the state will use the \$85.5 million set aside through the Natural Resource Damage Assessment money BP is paying as part of the Deepwater Horizon spill settlement to build a new hotel and conference center and renovate Gulf State Park. He said he hopes the EDAA can hold its future summer conferences there.

In an interview after his talk, Bentley said a team at the University of Alabama is studying the feasibility of the development plan for the Gulf State Park conference center and he hopes to announce a start date for construction later this year.

As successful as AIDT, the state's workforce training program, has been, Bentley said more work needs to be done to expand skills training across all levels of education. The Alabama State Workforce Council was created for this purpose, he said.

"We have to continue this process of moving us forward from a low-tech manufacturing state to a high-tech, high-skill state," he said.

Bentley said students and parents need to be convinced that high-skilled jobs are as important as professional jobs and children shouldn't be discouraged from pursuing jobs in advanced manufacturing.

Bentley also discussed the many facets of being governor and how it is more challenging than he thought when he was in the Legislature. But he said he enjoys the job and is hopeful to do it four more years if he is re-elected in November.

"The most important thing I do as governor is to be the face of the state," he said. "I represent all of the people."

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Top aide for Gov. Robert Bentley, Luther Strange to testify at EPA's hearing on carbon emissions

Al.com

July 29, 2014

Mike Cason

MONTGOMERY, Alabama --- A top aide to Gov. Robert Bentley will testify at a hearing today that proposed restrictions on coal-burning power plants will hurt Alabama, according to a news release from the governor's office.

Blaine Galliher, a former state representative from Gadsden who is Bentley's senior advisor, will testify at the Environmental Protection Agency's public hearing in Atlanta.

The EPA has proposed a plan to cut carbon emissions from power plants by 30 percent by 2030. Bentley opposes the plan.

In a statement, Bentley said the proposed rules would hurt Alabama's economy and raise electricity rates. He said it could eliminate more than half of the 4,500 coal industry jobs in Alabama.

Attorney General Luther Strange will also testify at the hearing. Strange has spoken out against the proposed rules before.

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WILLIAM J. CANARY: Fix Highway Trust Fund

Gadsden Times

July 28, 2014

Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx recently warned that without quick action, the Highway Trust Fund will start running out of money in August. That would mean a cut in federal highway funding of at least 28 percent to Alabama and other states.

Congress and the Obama Administration must act to prevent this from happening.

That's why the Business Council of Alabama representing its members, manufacturers, chambers of commerce and similar organizations in all 50 states, signed a letter asking Congress to return the Highway Trust Fund to solvency. It urges House and Senate committees to find bipartisan, short- and long-term solutions to the pending shortfall: "Congress must act to fix the Highway Trust Fund without delay."

The House recently voted 367-55 for a bill to avert a shutdown of construction projects through May 2015. The Senate is conserving its version of highway funding. We urge both houses of Congress to work together and send President Barack Obama a fix by the end of the month to support a much-needed continuity for economic development, international trade, and job creation. Without action, the Highway Trust Fund could be depleted in September. Dozens of Alabama road projects could come to a standstill on Oct. 1. In addition, the Alabama Road Builders Association says that 35,000 jobs depend on road contracts that have an economic impact of \$1 billion.

In each of the last two years, Alabama received more than \$700 million in federal highway funding. Alabama Department of Transportation Chief Engineer Ronnie Baldwin said a shortfall would mean big cuts and likely would end plans for new construction projects.

To compete in this economy, we must continually invest and modernize our infrastructure. To say that an adequate road transportation system is huge is an understatement. The nation's manufacturing segment alone contributed \$2.08 trillion to the economy, up from \$2.03 trillion in 2012. Manufacturers and chambers of commerce are rallying support for broad-based, job-creating investments in upgrades, expansion, and modernization of our transportation network.

The position of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers, of which the BCA is the sole representative in Alabama, includes advocating for increased public and private infrastructure funding, developing an interstate system focused on moving goods to market, increasing highway, bridge, rail and transit investments and capacity improvements, not to mention supporting efforts to reduce traffic congestion. For nearly 60 years, the Highway Trust Fund has served the nation's transportation infrastructure well and helped birth the world's largest economy. Lack of legislative and executive branch action can compromise this status.

It cannot be stated enough that an adequate transportation system is the lifeblood of the nation's economic system: Ultimately, virtually everything moves by road, not to mention drivers need safe commutes to jobs and to leisure vacation travel. We are encouraged by the recent developments that indicate some movement in the House to address the Trust Fund and hope the Senate follows. Congress, both Democrats and Republicans, and the administration must act responsibly.

But time is short. As we say in our letter, the consequence of inaction is too high. We urge parties to put aside politics and solve the Trust Fund's structural deficiencies.

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Attorney General Strange faces tough questions from sheriffs on permits, guns at polls

Al.com

July 28, 2014

Brendan Kirby

ORANGE BEACH, Alabama – Attorney General Luther Strange, under fire from some sheriffs over his handling of gun legislation, said Monday that he would support legislation to ban the open carry of firearms in polling places.

The issue erupted during the June 3 primary when at least three people in Shelby County challenged gun prohibitions at voting locations. A Tuscaloosa County man cast his ballot in this month's primary runoff with a .40-caliber pistol on his hip.

The Attorney General's Office advised in an official opinion that government buildings that already ban guns can prohibit them when those locations double as polling places but that the

decision on whether to allow guns rests with the owners when voting takes place in churches or other private property.

"Just be straight with us," said Montgomery County Sheriff D.T. Marshall, who implored Strange not to give a political answer.

Responded Strange: "I agree with you. I would support that. ... I have no interest in trying to intimidate people in polling places."

Strange added that whatever stand he takes on proposals before the Legislature, he has to make sure they are constitutional. He cited a court ruling in the District of Columbia over the weekend striking down a law prohibiting people from have guns in public.

Marshall said he understands that a law restricting guns in polling places likely would be challenged.

"This is plain and simple. Either you can or you can't," he said. "This will go to court if it passes."

Strange told reporters outside Ballroom D at the Perdido Beach Resort that he must enforce and defend duly enacted laws passed by the Legislature.

"It's a controversial issue. I'm a strong Second Amendment supporter. Our job is to get it right," he said. "We need to look at the constitutionality of any proposal."

Strange noted that his office is working on a second opinion regarding whether sheriffs have the discretion to regulate guns in polling places under current law. He said that opinion would be issued before the November election.

"It's a little premature about whether we need legislation," he said.

Marshall told reporters that he wishes the Attorney General's Office would have provided that guidance before the primary. He said people should not be taking guns into voting booths.

"That intimidates a whole lot of people," he said.

Escambia County Sheriff Grover Smith he has no problem with someone taking a concealed handgun into a polling place. Depending on the circumstances, he added, having a gun in public view can be intimidating.

"If we've got someone loud and boisterous and they've also got a gun, I've got concerns," he told reporters.

During the session in front of the Alabama Sheriffs' Association, Smith chided Strange for his performance during the debate over a law passed in 2013 narrowing the discretion of sheriffs to deny permits to carry concealed guns. Most sheriffs opposed the bill, and Smith – who was the

association's president and later the organization's representative on the issue – said he tried to get Strange to support the sheriffs.

Instead, Smith said, Strange told him that he would review the matter and get back to him.

"That never happened, sir," he said.

Strange downplayed the disagreement. "We're with you, but we may not always agree," he told the assembly of law enforcement officers.

Smith said after Strange's appearance that he would have accepted a straight answer that attorney general supported the bill or even that would not take a stance. Instead, Smith said, he could not get Strange to return his phone calls.

"He nor his office would ever commit to me that he would oppose or support the gun legislation," he said.

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Sessions: U.S. must confront illicit trade practices that hurt American industry, workers

Yellowhammer News

July 28, 2014

By: U.S. Sen. Jeff Sessions

For over 150 years, the steel industry has been a central part of Alabama's economy and its workers have been a shared source of pride. And it remains so. Today, the steel industry employs over 50,000 people in good jobs throughout our state. But the industry faces worldwide challenges, many from foreign-government-supported companies. It is critical we give our workers the full and just protections of our trade laws so they can fairly compete in a global marketplace. Ensuring a vital manufacturing core—especially steel—is essential to both our economic and national security. A strong nation produces, manufactures, and builds.

As international demand for steel has fallen, foreign manufacturers—with their government's support—have targeted the U.S. market. Since 2008, imports have increased by a dramatic 60 percent. A recent Economic Policy Institute report stated that "surging imports of unfairly traded steel are threatening U.S. steel production, which supports more than a half million U.S. jobs across every state of the nation. The import surge has depressed domestic steel production and revenues, leading to sharp declines in net income in the U.S. steel industry over the past two years (2012–2013), layoffs for thousands of workers, and reduced wages for many more."

Last year the Senate formed a bipartisan Steel Caucus to deal with the deep challenges our domestic steel industry is facing. As co-chair of the Senate Steel Caucus, I believe we must confront illicit trade practices overseas that undercut our own workers and industries. One action that is producing increased dumping of foreign steel is directly attributed to actions by China. They ship steel to a Korean corporation for processing, which then ships out its vast, new supply.

Again, quoting the Economic Policy Institute, this new production will “account for more than a third of total excess global capacity, which now exceeds half a billion metric tons. Much of this capacity is targeted on the U.S. market, one of the largest and most open in the world.” Over the last year, I have called on the Department of Commerce to review and investigate the dumping of foreign steel on the U.S. market.

Earlier this month, responding in part to pressure from Congress and concerned citizens, the Department of Commerce announced it would impose tariffs on certain Korean steel pipe used in oil and gas extraction exported to the United States. This is a positive step in restoring balance in our trade markets; however, several other trade cases on steel products remain pending, including cases on rebar from Turkey and Mexico. The Department of Commerce must conduct an exhaustive investigation in these and other pending trade cases and take action to the fullest extent of the law. While much work remains to be done, I look forward to future gains in the steel industry and to holding trading partners accountable when they skirt trade laws. Our steel industry has never been more modern and efficient.

Trade, like any contract, must work for both parties—yet, too often, our trading policies have allowed these abuses and currency manipulation which have enriched other countries while eroding our own industry. Our economic policies too often raise the cost of doing business in America while reducing the cost of imported subsidized goods into America. Our goal, for workers and companies alike, should be more production of goods here in the U.S.—producing a rising standard of living for our citizens. No country can survive without manufacturing. In addition, we must focus a strong effort to end currency manipulation by trading partners, which gives them a big trade advantage.

The talent and work ethic of our citizens is the best in the world. They have built and sustained this country. Yet these accomplishments risk receding if we allow American industry to fail and our jobs to ship overseas. A smart trade policy, combined with a more competitive tax code and streamlined regulations, will keep more jobs here in the U.S.—and ensure that we remain the dominant economic force in the world.

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Parker Griffith: Democrats pushed me 'with a knife' to get me to run for Alabama governor

Al.com

July 28, 2014

Jim Stinson

Another video has arisen showing Parker Griffith, the Democratic nominee for governor, speaking his mind with a colorful metaphor.

The latest video, posted by a group called America Rising, shows Griffith speaking to a small group, and explaining why he is running for governor.

But at first, Griffith kicks off explaining his decision to run against an incumbent Republican governor with a rhetorical question involving a shiv.

"How did I get here?" Griffith asked rhetorically. "Why am I the guy they shoved out on the end of the diving board, OK, stuck him in the butt with a knife?"

It's not clear when the remarks were made. Griffith did not immediately respond to a message requesting comment.

It hasn't been the first time Griffith has made comments that have grabbed media attention, perhaps for the wrong reason.

An earlier leaked video, perhaps from the same meeting, had Griffith comparing Alabama politics to war between the Sunni and Shiite sects of Islam.

"Alabama (politics) reminds me of the Shiites and the Sunnis," he said.

It is clear Griffith has drawn attention from America Rising PAC, which posts videos showing Democratic candidates or officials in an unflattering light.

Politico reports America Rising is a Republican opposition-research firm founded by former Mitt Romney campaign manager Matt Rhoades and former Republican National Committee research director Joe Pounder. But the site operates like a news website, posting videos and hoping they go viral on their own.

The "trackers" assisting America Rising, who follow the candidates with video cameras or who gather video from other sources, have been posting videos about U.S. Sen. John Walsh, D-Mont.; Democratic Senate nominee candidate Alison Lundergan Grimes in Kentucky; Vice President Joe Biden; Hillary Clinton; and U.S. Rep. Joe Garcia, D-Fla.

The leaked Griffith video is the latest in a war between Democrats and Republicans that kicked off with the rise of YouTube in 2005, and the subsequent embarrassment of Republican George Allen, an incumbent U.S. senator from Virginia. In 2006, during a heated re-election battle, Allen called a Democratic operative with a video camera a "macaca," referring to the macaque monkey.

The video was posted to YouTube, and took off. Allen's insult, made against a person of Indian descent, caused outrage and may have cost him his Senate seat. Allen lost narrowly to Democrat Jim Webb in November 2006.

A video that embarrasses a candidate is now called a "macaca moment."

Griffith, of Huntsville, is a former Democratic congressman from Alabama elected in 2008 from the 5th District. Griffith switched to the GOP in 2009 but lost the GOP congressional primary in 2010. When he decided to run against incumbent Gov. Robert Bentley, a Republican, Griffith switched back to the Democrats.

The Griffith video is below.

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Bentley appoints Pam Ware to ASU Board of Trustees

Montgomery Advertiser

July 28, 2014

Josh Moon

Gov. Robert Bentley has appointed Pam Ware to the Alabama State University board of trustees.

"I am deeply honored that (Bentley) has appointed me to serve on the board of trustees for (ASU)," Ware said in a statement. "We have a critical mission that involves restoring this institution to financial soundness and restoring public confidence in the administration."

Ware, an ASU alum, currently serves as the manager of intergovernmental affairs for the Business Council of Alabama.

Bentley also announced on Monday that the ASU board will hold a special called meeting on Friday, Aug. 8 at ASU. It is expected to select new board officers at that meeting.

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Alabama State president gets \$1,000 a month car allowance but has no car

The Associated Press

July 28, 2014

MONTGOMERY, Alabama — The contract for Alabama State University's president provides her a car allowance of \$1,000 per month, but she doesn't own a car.

The Montgomery Advertiser reports that campus police drive President Gwendolyn Boyd, and the police officer who does most of the driving had more than \$12,000 in overtime between Feb. 1 and June 1.

Boyd said having an officer drive her is nothing new.

"As president and CEO of ASU, it has been a standard requirement for the president of ASU to have a security escort," she said.

She said the campus public safety director is responsible for scheduling officers and the scheduling should be done in a manner that doesn't call for overtime.

Former trustee Vice Chairman Marvin Wiggins first raised the issue of Boyd's car allowance and police driver. That was before Gov. Robert Bentley removed him from the Alabama State board on Friday.

Wiggins, a circuit judge for several west Alabama counties, said he has no problem with Boyd getting a car allowance or having someone drive her. "But you simply cannot take the car allowance, not have a car and then cause thousands of dollars in charges to drive you everywhere," he said.

Boyd's contract, which she signed Jan. 2, calls for her to provide her own vehicle for business use and for the board to provide insurance coverage and a credit card to cover gas and maintenance. That is in addition to the allowance.

Boyd, an Alabama State graduate, was an administrator at Johns Hopkins University before taking the Alabama State job.

Last week, Gov. Bentley, president of the Alabama State board of trustees by virtue of his office, called for Wiggins and trustee Chairman Elton Dean to resign by Thursday afternoon. His demand drew support from the presidents of the national alumni association and the Student Government Association. Dean resigned, but Wiggins refused. The governor removed him Friday and named Ralph D. Ruggs, executive director of the Tuscaloosa Housing Authority, to serve the remainder of Wiggins' term.

On Monday, the governor scheduled a special meeting of the Alabama State board for Friday Aug. 8. on the Montgomery campus. His announcement did not give a reason for the meeting.

In a related development, former Alabama State trustee Donald Watkins of Birmingham distributed a letter saying he made a mistake when he recommended Boyd for the university presidency. He said Boyd and Bentley have formed "an unholy alliance."

"By removing any member of the board of trustees who discharged his/her statutory duty by questioning Boyd's administrative actions and extravagant expenditures, Bentley has established an 'Imperial Presidency' in Boyd," Watkins wrote.

University spokesman Ken Mullinax said the university had no comment on Watkins' letter.

Alabama State has been in turmoil since late 2012, when Joseph Silver resigned as president after questioning some financial practices at the university. The governor hired a Birmingham firm to do a forensic audit and turned over its preliminary findings to state and federal prosecutors. Moody's recently downgraded the university's bond rating and an accrediting agency, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, gave the university a six-month warning.

Boyd said Monday she is working to respond to the accrediting agency and is confident the six-month warning will be removed. "We will also respond to Moody's concerns and will work diligently to get our credit rating restored," she said.

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Court: Virginia same-sex marriage ban unconstitutional

Politico

July 28, 2014

A federal appeals court ruled Monday that Virginia's ban on same-sex marriage is unconstitutional.

The 2-1 ruling from the 4th Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals upheld a district court judge's ruling in February (on Valentine's Day, actually) striking down the state's prohibition on issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples.

"Neither Virginia's federalism-based interest in defining marriage nor our respect for the democratic process that codified that definition can excuse the Virginia Marriage Laws' infringement of the right to marry," Judge Henry Floyd wrote in an opinion joined by Judge Roger Gregory (and posted here). "We recognize that same-sex marriage makes some people deeply uncomfortable. However, inertia and apprehension are not legitimate bases for denying same-sex couples due process and equal protection of the laws."

(PHOTOS: 26 gay-rights milestones)

Judge Paul Niemeyer dissented. "Because there exist deep, fundamental differences between traditional and same-sex marriage, the plaintiffs and the majority err by conflating the two relationships under the loosely drawn rubric of 'the right to marriage,'" he wrote. "Rather, to obtain constitutional protection, they would have to show that the right to same-sex marriage is itself deeply rooted in our Nation's history. They have not attempted to do so and could not succeed if they were so to attempt."

Niemeyer said the Virginia ban should be subjected to a rational basis test, a less strict form of review than the strict scrutiny his colleagues applied.

"While I express no viewpoint on the merits of the policy debate, I do strongly disagree with the assertion that same-sex marriage is subject to the same constitutional protections as the traditional right to marry," he added.

(Also on POLITICO: Warner comes out swinging in Virginia debate)

Floyd was appointed by President Barack Obama. Gregory received a recess appointment from President Bill Clinton after failing to be confirmed by the Senate. Gregory was later confirmed to a permanent seat after being nominated again by President George W. Bush. Niemeyer was appointed by President George H.W. Bush.

The Richmond, Va.-based 4th Circuit has now joined the Denver-based 10th Circuit, which earlier this month struck down a similar ban in Oklahoma. Both courts could ultimately send the cases to be reheard by all active judges on those courts, instead of the three-judge panels which considered them the first time around.

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150th anniversary of Mobile Bay battle coming

The Associated Press

July 29, 2014

GULF SHORES, Ala. (AP) — Civil War re-enactors from across the nation will be on the Alabama coast this weekend to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Mobile Bay and the Siege of Fort Morgan.

Organizers say the activities will begin Friday evening with a concert of Civil War music by Bobby Horton. The re-enactment begins Saturday morning with the attack of the Union Navy. The re-enactment continues all day and concludes Saturday night with a barrage of artillery firing over the effort. The re-enactment continues Sunday with the surrender of Fort Morgan.

Organizers say the commemoration will include a special naval display of rarely exhibited artifacts from three ships involved in the battle: the USS Tecumseh, the USS Philippi and the CSS Gaines.

Single-day tickets are \$10 and three-day passes are \$20.

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Moms winning the Common Core war

Politico

July 28, 2014

Stephanie Simon

The millions have proved no match for the moms.

Supporters of the Common Core academic standards have spent big this past year to persuade wavering state legislators to stick with the new guidelines for math and language arts instruction. Given the firestorm of opposition that took them by surprise, they consider it a victory that just five states, so far, have taken steps to back out.

But in a series of strategy sessions in recent months, top promoters of the standards have concluded they're losing the broader public debate — and need to devise better PR.

(Also on POLITICO: Undocumented immigrants call for W.H. boycott)

Consider: Conservative commentators Glenn Beck and Michelle Malkin held a crackling town hall meeting last week describing the Common Core as a threat to local control of education. The two-hour event was simulcast in 700 movie theaters nationwide and will be rebroadcast Tuesday night in more than 500.

About 10,000 aspiring activists have since downloaded Beck's "action plan" for defeating the standards. Beck's slogan, "We will not conform," is still echoing on Twitter. FreedomWorks, the tea party group that co-sponsored the event, is planning Skype chats to hash out tactics with local activists inspired by the evening.

The response from Common Core backers?

A pair of sedate videos featuring three former Republican governors — one of whom has been out of office for 11 years — sitting in front of a gray backdrop, eyes fixed on a point slightly off camera as they cycled through familiar talking points. And a news release offering quotes from standards supporters, including a fifth-grade teacher in rural Colorado and a Pentecostal preacher from Virginia.

(Also on POLITICO: GOP rejects tax crackdown)

Neither seemed likely to set social media ablaze.

So, backed with fresh funding from philanthropic supporters, including a \$10.3 million grant awarded in May from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, supporters are gearing up for a major reboot of the Common Core campaign.

"We've been fighting emotion with talking points, and it doesn't work," said Mike Petrilli, executive vice president of the Fordham Institute, a leading supporter of the standards. "There's got to be a way to get more emotional with our arguments if we want to win this thing. That means we have a lot more work to do."

Step one: Get Americans angry about the current state of public education.

To that end, expect to start hearing from frustrated college students who ended up in remedial classes even though they passed all their state tests and earned good grades in high school. "These kids should be as mad as hell" that the system failed them, Petrilli said.

(Also on POLITICO: GOP's black market: Anti-incumbent campaigns)

Expect poignant testimonials, too, from business owners who have tried to hire kids from the local high school only to find they can't do tasks involving basic math, such as separating out two-thirds of a pile of lumber.

Step two: Get voters excited about the prospects of change. Teachers who like the standards are going to be sharing more concrete examples of benefits they see in their classrooms. Groups representing minority students will likely be more vocal, too. The National Council of La Raza, for instance, is promoting a new video featuring a little girl who credits the standards with teaching her the word "whimsical."

And there will be a whole lot more from the pro-Common Core side on social media, including Pinterest pages full of student work. A coming Twitter blitz will aim to stir up buzz for a new

video that tracks a debate between four people who at first seem to want very different things from their schools — but end up discovering they all support the standards. The video, produced by an Arizona coalition, doesn't once mention the well-worn talking points “academic rigor” or “international benchmarks.”

“The Common Core message so far has been a head message. We've done a good job talking about facts and figures. But we need to move 18 inches south and start talking about a heart message,” said Wes Farno, executive director of the Higher State Standards Partnership, a coalition supported by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Business Roundtable.

(Also on POLITICO: Susan Rice: Gaza death toll ‘alarming’)

The looming PR blitz doesn't worry Common Core opponents.

“The phrase we use a lot down here in our messaging is ‘putting lipstick on a pig,’” said Karen Effrem, co-founder of the Florida Stop Common Core Coalition. “You can't make something that's so bad look good.”

Some Common Core backers are also dubious.

“There wasn't a good job of messaging this early on, and I'm not sure those deficits can be addressed,” said Daniel Lautzenheiser, an education analyst at the American Enterprise Institute. Even a fresh approach, he said, might not be enough to “stem the tide of opposition.”

The mommy platoons

Standards supporters say they're at a huge disadvantage in the PR fight because anytime a child brings home a confusing worksheet, gets a bad grade or stresses out about a test, parents can — and do — blame it on the Common Core. (An anonymous wag satirized that phenomenon with the launch last week of a Twitter feed that blames all the ills of the world on the standards. As in: “The car in front of me didn't use a blinker. #ThanksCommonCore.”)

Teachers who like the Common Core say it's revolutionized their classrooms, prodding students to read texts more closely and think more analytically. But it's hard to convey that in a tweet. Really good sixth-grade essay questions rarely go viral. A nonsensical math problem might, whether or not it truly has anything to do with the Common Core.

Analysts say the opposition also has an edge because it's tapped into a populist anger that animates both left and right. The self-proclaimed “mommy platoons” organized to take down the standards portray them as an inferior product forced on unsuspecting communities by a cabal of big business and big government elites. Every time supporters come out with sophisticated new promotional material, it only feeds their anger at the big money backing the Common Core, including about \$200 million from the Gates Foundation.

Many of the opponents' claims are misleading or outright false. But their passion leaves an indelible impression.

And until now, Common Core backers have tried to fight it with sober testimony at statehouse hearings and earnest op-eds in the local paper. With a few notable exceptions — like a peppy animated video produced by the Council of the Great City Schools — messaging in support of the standards has been fairly stilted, backers acknowledge with chagrin.

“We joke about it sometimes,” said Richard McKeon, education program director for the Helmsley Charitable Trust, which has directed \$3 million in the past few months to bolster communications. The opposition, he says, stirs up waves of populist fury — and supporters “respond with a fact sheet.”

Common Core supporters acknowledge they also erred in publicly belittling opponents as silly, ignorant or outright kooky. “We make a great mistake by caricaturing the opponents of the standards as crazies or people who don’t tell the truth,” David Coleman, an architect of the standards, told Bloomberg EDU recently.

Another misstep: Much of the Common Core outreach to date has been aimed narrowly at politicians, not parents.

Indeed, some of the talking points crafted to win over Republican lawmakers seemed likely to backfire with moms and dads, such as when Billy Canary, president of the Business Council of Alabama, referred to children as “the product created by our education system” and said businesses need schools to start turning out better product.

The lobbying effort has kept 40 states and D.C. committed to the standards, but the Common Core remains a volatile issue in states including Louisiana, Wisconsin and Ohio. More repeal votes are expected in the coming year.

Meanwhile, national polling released in the spring by Achieve Inc., which helped write the standards, found voters more skeptical of the Common Core than they were two years ago. A Pew Research Center report last month found solid opposition among all Republicans, not just tea party members, while support from liberals was fairly anemic, at around 55 percent. And a recent Siena College poll of likely voters in New York state found 49 percent want to drop the standards and only 39 percent want to keep them.

“The bottom line here is that parents need more information, and maybe we haven’t been good enough at telling them the story,” said Karen Nussle, a veteran PR strategist who runs the Collaborative for Student Success.

Ditching the data points

The collaborative is working on the new outreach campaign, drawing on a \$14 million annual budget from a number of philanthropies, led by the Gates Foundation.

Other groups are pitching in, too.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation is working on an animated website that will pay homage to the playful spirit of children and link the Common Core to that kind of creativity. Vice President Cheryl Oldham boasts that there won't be a single data point on the site; it's designed to prompt a visceral, not an intellectual, response.

"We're so good at all our statistics and data and rational arguments ... [but] emotion is what gets people feeling passionate," Oldham said. "It may not be the most comfortable place for the business community ... [but] we need to get better at doing it."

The pro-Common Core side lacks the star power of the opposition, which has been boosted not just by Beck and Malkin but by comedians like Stephen Colbert and Louis C.K. Former NBA star Isiah Thomas wrote an op-ed supporting the standards, and foundations set up by the actress Eva Longoria and singer John Legend helped fund a pro-Common Core TV ad that ran on Fox News this spring, but none of the three has taken on a highly visible role.

Instead, the new campaign will rely heavily on ordinary people seen as trusted messengers in their local community — teachers, pastors, small-business owners.

"There's a whole group of people out there who are reasonable and want to talk about a good education for their children. Those are the people we want to reach," said Carissa Miller, deputy executive director of the Council of Chief State School Officers, which helped write the standards.

Common Core opponents are also updating their PR playbook.

They're using their social media savvy to disrupt pro-standards outreach. A recent Twitter town hall sponsored by the Learning First Alliance was continually interrupted by the digital equivalent of hecklers who used the chat's hashtag, #CCSStime, to post photos of confusing Common Core homework and challenge the motivation of those supporting the standards.

Activists are also pushing one another to tone down the wild-eyed rhetoric that has repeatedly cropped up on some websites. They warn newcomers to the cause that even a few outlandish claims make it easy for Common Core backers to dismiss the entire opposition as conspiracy theorists in tinfoil hats.

"The Common Core is so bad, you don't have to lie," said Erin Tuttle, co-founder of Hoosiers Against Common Core. "If you can't prove what you're saying, if you can't back it up with a document or a source, you shouldn't put it out there."

In that vein, strategists at the Glenn Beck event told activists to refrain from describing the standards as a communist plot and to steer clear of phrases that might turn off liberals, like comparing the standards to Obamacare. (Not all took the call for moderation to heart: A tweet using Beck's #wewillnotconform hashtag called Common Core "a page from hitler playbook.")

Beck's action plan also urges members of his grass-roots army to actually read the standards they're critiquing. And it recommends calm, concise presentations.

"You can be angry or effective," said Brian Glicklich, a crisis communications expert who spoke at the event, "but you can rarely be both at the same time.

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Deal Allots \$17 Billion for Overhaul of V.A. Health Care System

The New York Times

July 28, 2014

WASHINGTON — House and Senate negotiators announced an agreement Monday on legislation that would allocate about \$17 billion to overhaul the Department of Veterans Affairs' sprawling and beleaguered health care system. But the deal does not give the department everything that officials there have said is needed to fix its problems.

The agreement set off a frantic rush on Capitol Hill to gather signatures from members of the conference committee working on the bill so that it could be put to a vote of the full House and Senate before lawmakers adjourn for an August recess on Friday.

Representative Jeff Miller, left, a Florida Republican who is chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, and his counterpart in the Senate, Bernard Sanders, a Vermont independent. Credit Doug Mills/The New York Times

The most expensive part of the three-year measure would provide \$10 billion for certain patients — who either live more than 40 miles from a department site or face a wait of more than 30 days for an appointment — to receive government-paid care from a private doctor. The private care would still largely be coordinated by the Department of Veterans Affairs, which in most cases would be involved in the scheduling and retain a copy of medical records from the visit, according to a person briefed on the provision.

In addition, most of a separate \$5 billion allocation would pay for additional doctors and nurses to drive down patient wait times, although it is unclear how many clinicians the department could hire quickly when there is a shortage of medical care providers in many parts of the country. An additional \$1.5 billion or so would be spent to secure leases at 27 major facilities to give the department more space for clinicians to treat patients.

The acting Veterans Affairs secretary, Sloan D. Gibson, has said the department requires almost \$18 billion for overhauls, mostly for new clinicians and building space, just to meet current demand. Department officials did not respond to questions about whether they would go back to Congress to seek the rest of the money for doctors and office space that Mr. Gibson said was needed. The person briefed on specifics of the deal, who was not authorized to speak publicly and spoke on the condition of anonymity, said it did not include money to upgrade the department's outdated scheduling system, as had been expected and which Mr. Gibson had suggested was crucial.

The measure would also authorize the department's secretary to fire senior executives deemed incompetent or to have committed misconduct, subject to a 21-day appeal.

The proposed legislation is in response to a scandal at the department this past spring, when many facilities were found to have been manipulating patient waiting lists to disguise long delays caused in part by shortages of doctors and nurses.

Continue reading the main storyContinue reading the main story

Pressure for patients to be seen within 14 days — a goal tied to many administrators' performance reviews and bonuses — played a significant role in deceptions about wait times, officials later suggested. The delays and doctored waiting lists became a political liability for the Obama administration and led to the resignation of the secretary of Veterans Affairs, Eric Shinseki, in May.

Continue reading the main story

Share Your Experience With Veterans Affairs Health Care

All attention now turns to whether Congress can pass the bill before the August break — and whether some lawmakers, including Republicans concerned about the price tag, will balk.

Representative Jeff Miller, a Florida Republican who is chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, said he was confident that he could win Republican support for the bill despite the cost.

“There will be an education process that will have to take place,” Mr. Miller said at the news conference announcing the deal. “Obviously, some of our members will need a little more educating than others.”

His counterpart in the Senate, Bernard Sanders, a Vermont independent, likened the spending to important national security funding.

“Planes and tanks and guns are a cost of war,” Mr. Sanders said. “So is taking care of the men and women who use those weapons and fight our battles.”

Garry Augustine, the Washington executive director of Disabled American Veterans, one of the largest groups of former military service members, said that the \$5 billion portion of the bill allocated mainly for doctors and other clinicians was a good start, but that more would be needed.

“We like to look at it as a down payment” on Mr. Gibson's request to fully fund the department, Mr. Augustine said. He said that he would wait to see how the \$10 billion for private care would work in practice, and that it was important that the department keep a close connection to veterans who visit private doctors.