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FULL TEXT

Greer, Buttram named to Alabama Workforce Council

Cullman Times

July 4, 2014

Trent Moore

July 04--Two Cullman natives are among 28 appointees to Governor Robert Bentley's Alabama Workforce Council, created to advise and support members of the K-12 school, two-year college

and four-year university systems to address the needs of new and existing businesses and industries in Alabama.

State Rep. Mac Buttram (R-Cullman) and Cullman Economic Development Agency Assistant Director Dale Greer have both been appointed to the council, which is mostly comprised of major business and industry leaders across the state.

The advisory board is tasked with working to ensure Alabama's workforce development programs are meeting the most pressing job needs of the state's business and industry.

Buttram said he was honored to be chosen, and noted he has already served in various capacities with the state's career-readiness task force as well as a national board with a similar goal.

"I've done a lot of work on workforce development in the legislature and I think its one of the big needs we have right now," he said. "In the past, we've educated our students and then told the workforce 'Here they are.' Now, we're asking business and industry what they need a high school, or college graduate to know. We're hoping to better match those skills."

Greer has been a long-time member of the Region 2 Workforce Development Council in connection to his duties as a developer, as well as a founding member of Cullman Area Workforce Solutions, and said he was humbled to make the cut for the new state-wide council.

"Focusing resources on establishing better coordination and communication between education and the business/industry community is critical if we are to continue to move Alabama forward," he said. "The success of any company is directly tied to the quality of their labor pool. There is no better way to insure our education system is adequately preparing students for today's workforce than helping insure business and industry detail the type of skills and training they demand from the people they employ. I hope to be able to add the perspective of the economic development professionals -- tasked with recruiting new industry and growing our existing industries -- to the committee discussions."

The council was formed following a recommendation from the Governor's College and Career Ready Task Force created in 2013 to address ways to improve educational outcomes and promote workforce and economic development. Senate Bill 217, sponsored by Sen. Paul Bussman (R-Cullman), created the council in the 2014 legislative session.

"There is nothing more important to our state than job creation and having students who are college and career ready is one of the critical components of economic development," Bentley said in a statement. "The Alabama Workforce Council is a world-class representation of many of the state's top business and industry leaders and will be vitally important to building and maintaining high-quality partnerships between industry, education and workforce training institutions. Preparing Alabama workers for high-wage, high-demand jobs is our number one priority."

Social Security changes you need to know now.

Alabama Power Executive Vice President of External Affairs Zeke Smith has been tapped to chair the council.

"It is important there is an open dialogue between industry and education," Smith said. "I am optimistic the council will make a difference helping our educational leaders develop a robust workforce that can step right in and fill the needs of industry and business."

The Alabama Workforce Council's first meeting will be held July 21 in Montgomery.

Other members of the board include Blaine Galliher with the Office of Governor Robert Bentley, Dr. Joseph B. Morton with the Alabama Business Education Alliance, Raymond W. Perez with Honda Manufacturing of Alabama LLC, Jerry Mays the former Mayor of Phil Campbell, Fitzgerald Washington with Buffalo Rock Company, Mike Kitchens with American Cast Iron Pipe Company, Tim McCartney with McCartney Construction Company Inc., Keith I. Weil with Golden Dragon Copper Tubing, Charles (Chuck) DiLaura with Neptune Technology Group Inc., Allen Harris with Bailey -- Harris Construction, Kelvin J. Hill with Georgia Pacific, Jed Downs with Qualico Steel, Michael D. Davis with Toray Carbon Fibers America Inc., Arthur J. Tipton, Ph. D. with Southern Research Institute, David A. King with Dynetics Inc., Norman A. Crow with D.T. & Freight Company, Philip C. Johnston with Mercedes Benz U.S International, Bill Caton with Associated General Contractors, Jennifer Himburg with ALFA, Kasey Myers with GKN Aerospace Alabama Fuel Systems, Sandra Koblas with Austal Ship Building, Tom Bates with Evonik Industries, Michelle Hurdle with Airbus Americas Inc., Cleveland Poole with Pioneer Electric Cooperative Inc. and Terry Waters with the Governor's Office of Workforce Development.

The workforce council will be tasked with reviewing and developing recommendations associated with, but not limited to, the following:

Streamline and align the existing workforce development functions of the State.

Increase awareness and educate students on available opportunities in the various industry sectors.

Advertisement

Create a statistical feedback loop between industry and education.

Propose funding opportunities to increase established industry-funded and Education Budget allocations to be used as scholarship

programs for college technical education and dual enrollment programming.

Enhance public relations and marketing associated with career readiness and skilled craft trades.

Develop a mechanism that will ensure continuous emphasis on pre-kindergarten through graduate education.

Provide leadership and recommend standards for increasing membership and expanding operations of the existing 10 Regional Workforce Development Councils.

Identify and address critical unmet needs such as specialty skills in a specific region of the state.

Develop a methodology to guide program decisions and gauge the success of students as they enter the workforce.

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Jack Daniel's barrel-building shop near Decatur to open Monday with Alabama governor, officials

Al.com

July 6, 2014

Kay Campbell

TRINITY, Alabama – Alabama's tee totaling Gov. Robert Bentley will join other state and local leaders for the grand opening at 10 a.m., Monday, July 7, 2014, of a new barrel-building shop for Jack Daniels' Tennessee Whiskey in Trinity.

Jack Daniel's, the world's top selling whiskey, which is brewed and bottled in Lynchburg, Tenn., just northeast of Fayetteville, is aged in white oak barrels. The cooperage, as a barrel-building shop is called, in Trinity will employ about 200 people. Each of the Jack Daniels barrels is assembled by hand from about three dozen pieces.

Trinity, a community just west of Decatur, is home to the Mallard Fox West Industrial Complex, just south of Alabama 20 west of Decatur, where the cooperage is located.

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State Board of Education to elect new officers next week

Al.com

July 3, 2014

Evan Belanger

MONTGOMERY, Alabama -- The Alabama State Board of Education will hold its annual election of officers next week, deciding who will lead the board for the next year.

The Alabama State Department of Education confirmed today that the board will elect officers during its 1 p.m. meeting Tuesday at the Gordon Persons Building in Montgomery.

By statute, Gov. Robert Bentley leads the board as president, but since the governor rarely attends meetings, the vice president usually runs the meetings.

Currently, board member Charles Elliott of Decatur serves as vice president and board member Ella Bell of Montgomery serves as president pro tempore.

The pro tem runs board meetings when the vice president is unable to attend.

Elliott, who did not seek re-election in the Republican primary, is due to roll off the board in January. But Bell's current term does not expire until 2017, making her eligible to serve as an officer again.

The officer elections take effect immediately. The board oversees the state's K-12 school system as well as its community college system.

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5 questions with Alabama Secretary of State candidate John Merrill

Al.com

July 5, 2014

John Merrill

HUNTSVILLE, Alabama – John Merrill's interest in the Alabama secretary of state position dates to his teen-age years when his father first told him about the variety of duties associated with the job.

Now at age 50, Merrill is seeking that job as a Republican Party candidate. He is in a runoff with Reese McKinney on July 15. The winner will face Democratic candidate Lula Albert-Kaigler.

During a recent visit to AL.com in Huntsville, Merrill discussed the position and why he chose to run for secretary of state instead of seeking a second term as a state representative from Tuscaloosa County.

Question: Why the decision to run for Secretary of State instead of a second term in the legislature?

Merrill: "I had a constituent who had a very serious problem with the Secretary of State's office in an international adoption. They were trying to adopt their child from China. They had followed the directions of the Secretary of State, they called and asked if they need to come down there. They said no, just send in mail, we do it all the time. Well, the families don't do it all the time. They submitted their paperwork and when they called to follow-up, it had been signed for but it had been lost and they could not locate it. For about three weeks, they gave them the benefit of the doubt and tried to work with them. On July 4, 2012, she sent an email to 10 elected officials asking for some support and some help in trying to solve this problem. I read it all and I called her and I said we need to find a way to help you."

After helping the constituent complete the adoption process, Merrill began seriously considering a career change.

"I told my wife after all that happened that I'm really concerned about the Secretary of State's office," Merrill said. "Who is going to follow Beth Chapman because whoever follows her may not be as committed to this office as she's been. I'm afraid somebody might be running for the wrong reasons. I think I might want to look at this. I've known you for 30 years and I've never heard you say anything about this."

Q: Why give up a position as a lawmaker?

Merrill: "I think this is a job where I can do more good for more people and improve government services in a way that people can find real and tangible, bottom line."

Q: What is a key issue for you in the campaign?

Merrill: "In the area of business, incorporations, licenses and trademarking, you start a new business in North Carolina, it takes seven to 10 days have paperwork processed. If you do it in Delaware, they will do it in three days. If you do it in Colorado or Florida, they will do it the same day. We called (the Alabama Secretary of State) office several months ago and they said it would take four months to get it done. If you get a good lawyer, they'll tell you that if you let it run its natural course, it will probably take six to nine months to get it done. A good lawyer just charges his client the expedited fee and they will do it in a week. If they can do it in a week for an expedited fee, they ought to be able to do it in a week for nothing."

Q: You said Alabama has about 56,000 men and women in uniform serving outside the U.S. and that a law passed by the legislature allowing them to vote electronically has not been put into effect. Is making voting easier for those in uniform serving overseas a priority?

Merrill: "That's a priority but one of the benefits is you're not going to have another full-scale election for two years. So you've got some time to put some mechanisms in place to allow them to participate instead of having to worry about getting it done quickly as soon as you take office. I would like to see this trickle down not just for the presidential and gubernatorial elections but also municipal and county elections. Wherever people are that they call home, they should be able to participate. They've earned that right."

Q: What's the first thing you want to do in office?

Merrill: "To me, priority No. 1 has to do with the business filings. That's something that can be corrected easier and quicker than most anything else. You have to evaluate where you are first and assess the problem and you have to look and see what's going on there, what other states are doing and how they are doing it and why they are doing it quicker easier and obviously better. If they're doing it in a day and it's taking you four months, that's obviously a problem. It's something that needs some real attention."

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Dunn, Beeker face off in PSC runoff

The Associated Press

July 6, 2014

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — Former Greene County Commission Chairman Chip Beeker is challenging incumbent Terry Dunn for a seat on the Public Service Commission.

Dunn said he is running on his record of trying to protect consumers.

Dunn unsuccessfully sought formal hearings on the rates charged by state utilities including Alabama Power. Dunn said he believes the electric giant has been allowed too high of a profit margin and has too much influence with the state regulatory board.

Beeker disagrees with Dunn's push for formal hearings.

He said rates need to be low, but utilities need to be healthy to provide reliable service.

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Another State Senate candidate, a former Democrat, making run as an independent: Today in Alabama politics

Al.com

July 7, 2014

Leada Gore

Another candidate is seeking an Alabama Senate seat as an independent.

Former Democratic State Rep. Bill Fuller announced the Alabama Secretary of State has certified he has enough signatures to land on the November ballot to represent Senate District 13 in east Alabama. Fuller, an attorney, spent four terms in the State House representing Chambers, Randolph and Cleburne Counties, and portions of Lee, Clay and Cherokee Counties.

Like State Sen. Harri Ann Smith, who announced last week she is again seeking reelection as an independent after years as a Republican, Fuller said he thinks the voters in the district don't want another party politician in Montgomery.

"I'm running as an independent because political parties are the problem in Alabama and in Washington. I believe the voters of District 13 are highly intelligent, independent folks of deep personal faith, who are sick and tired of shenanigans and back room deals in the Alabama Senate," he said.

His campaign will center on a statewide vote to allow for the expansion of Medicaid, job growth and public safety, including funding for the state's court system and forensic sciences.

As a Democrat, Fuller made an unsuccessful run against Rep. Mike Rogers, a Republican, for U.S. Congress in 2004. His Senate run pits him against incumbent Sen. Gerald Dial, a Republican from Lineville, and Darrell Turner, the chairman of the Cleburne County Democratic Party.

What you missed over the weekend:

You voted for who you thought was the best and the worst president. How about governor?

A craft store is not a church,' protesters demonstrated at Hobby Lobby in Mobile

5 questions with Alabama Secretary of State candidate John Merrill

Michelle Obama fights Republicans on school lunch rules

President's failed immigration policies creating chaos and economic hardship for Americans, Sen. Jeff Sessions says

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Bentley to recognize funeral honor team members

The Associated Press

July 7, 2014

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — Alabama Gov. Robert Bentley is scheduled to sign an executive order honoring members of the state's Army and Air National Guards.

Bentley is scheduled to sign the order creating the Alabama Honor Guard Ribbon Monday afternoon in the Old House Chamber of the State Capitol. The executive order recognizes the service of the Alabama Army and Air National Guard Funeral Honor Guard team members.

The funeral honor guards are responsible for performing military ceremonies during funerals for eligible veterans.

The honors usually include the folding and presentation of an American flag to the next of kin and the playing of Taps.

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Medicaid revamp may come early to Shoals

Times Daily

July 5, 2014

Mary Sell

MONTGOMERY — Those involved in the process to change Alabama's Medicaid delivery system from a fee-for-service model to managed care said plans are on track for the switch in late 2016.

And it could happen a year earlier in the Shoals and Tennessee Valley.

In 2013, lawmakers approved the overhaul as a way to rein in Medicaid's constantly expanding costs.

To make the transition, Medicaid officials are splitting the state into five areas where Regional Care Organizations — largely run by health care providers — will operate. At least seven groups so far have stepped forward to say they want to run an a Regional Care Organization, or RCO, including Huntsville Hospital Health System. The system last month announced it would partner with Virginia-based Sentara Health Plans to create a nonprofit RCO.

"(Sentara) has over 19 years' experience in Medicaid risk," Huntsville CEO David Spillers said last week. "Right now, Huntsville and Sentara are putting together (the RCO plan). We are leaving the option for other owners who want to be at-risk to participate."

The RCOs are risk takers because if it costs them more to provide care to their patients than what the state provides, they will have to cover the difference. That per-patient allocation hasn't been decided yet, but could be later this summer.

The 10-county region the RCO would cover includes Lauderdale, Colbert, Franklin, Lawrence, Limestone and Morgan counties.

It would serve an estimated 120,000 Medicaid patients. The Huntsville Hospital system includes 12 medical facilities in north Alabama.

There is the option for multiple RCOs in one region, but Spillers said he hasn't heard of another proposal in this north Alabama region. Would-be RCOs have until later this year to submit their proposals.

Spillers said he'd like to see his RCO begin to serve patients in October 2015, a year before the deadline.

"We think from the state's perspective, it would be helpful for one region to go up first," Spillers said.

Having one pilot region would help work kinks out in others, he said. Otherwise, nearly one million Medicaid patients across the state would be uploaded into a new system on the same day.

"It is hard for me to imagine how that will work, and work successfully," he said.

Don Williamson, state health officer who also is the state's Medicaid leader, said Thursday it's encouraging to see perspective RCOs ready to move forward, but "the complexity of all this is amazing."

"I am excited that we have people that want to push the envelope and be ready a year early, but what will be incumbent on Medicaid will be to have the necessary framework in place so that everyone knows exactly what will be expected," Williamson said.

The federal government has not yet approved Alabama's waiver that would allow it to move to a managed care system. That could take six months or longer. Williamson said other states have managed care, so it is unlikely Alabama's request would be denied.

"But the devil is in the details," he said.

Controlling costs

In 2003, the state general fund appropriation for Medicaid was \$222.3 million. Next year, it is budgeted to be \$700 million.

Gov. Robert Bentley and lawmakers introduced the managed care route as a way to save money.

In its waiver, Alabama is asking it be given \$626 million in federal funds over five years.

"We then hope to save \$646 million over the same five years," Williamson said.

Bentley has refused to add about 300,000 more Alabamians to Medicaid through an Affordable Care Act expansion. He has called Medicaid a broken system and said the expansion would eventually cost the state too much money.

"One of the things that I am most proud of as governor has been our efforts to reform the Medicaid system," Bentley, a retired physician, said last week in an emailed statement.

"We are making significant progress toward implementing a new Medicaid delivery system that places greater focus on patient care by moving from a fee-for-service model to an outcomes-based model. There is still much work to be done, but we are committed to making Medicaid better for the Alabamians who are currently enrolled."

Bentley's Democratic opponent in the November general election, Parker Griffith, also a retired doctor, doesn't agree. He's advocated for expansion.

"I think it was a mistake not to embrace Medicaid expansion and reform," Griffith said last week. "The fact that they've decided to say we're not going to do anything with Medicaid until they are happy with Medicaid means that they are never going to do anything with it."

Expanding Medicaid would be possible under the RCOs, Williamson said, though adding 300,000 additional patients would require more health care providers.

About one in five Alabamians receive health care through Medicaid. But Spillers said they should all have an interest in this new managed care approach working.

"If the state isn't successful, every citizen and every hospital will be penalized," he said. "If this doesn't work, the Medicaid system will fail and that will impact everyone."

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Sluggish revenues could slow education budget payback to Alabama Trust Fund

Al.com

July 3, 2014

Mike Cason

MONTGOMERY, Alabama --- Alabama is still paying back \$437 million it borrowed to shore up the education budget during the recession, and flat tax revenues might slow down the pace.

The state still owes \$163 million and must pay it back by June 2015. Lawmakers had hoped to pay back as much as \$100 million of that this year.

This year's budget includes a \$35 million payment, plus another \$65 million if revenues are available.

But revenues to the Education Trust Fund have barely grown, just 0.7 percent, through the first three-fourths of the fiscal year.

Norris Green, director of the Legislative Fiscal Office, said revenues had been projected to grow more than that, at about 2 percent. He said it would take substantial growth over the next three months to allow for the full \$65 million conditional repayment.

The money is owed to the Alabama Trust Fund, which receives lease payments from companies with natural gas wells off the Gulf Coast. All \$437 million in the ATF's rainy day account was withdrawn six years ago.

Sen. Trip Pittman, chairman of the Senate Finance and Taxation education budget committee, said the federal debt, the Affordable Care Act and worries that new environmental regulations will raise utility bills are hurting the economy and, as a result, what people earn and pay in taxes.

"We're doing so many things at the federal level that are causing concerns going forward," Pittman said. "And all that plays into why the economy is underperforming."

More money would have been available for debt repayment if not for the Alabama Accountability Act. Lawmakers lowered ETF spending by \$40 million this year to offset the estimated costs of the parent tax credits and scholarship donor tax credits authorized under the law.

The actual amount of the credits for the first year of the AAA turned out to be closer to \$25 million because of low participation in the parent credits.

Whatever the state does not repay to the ATF this year will have to be paid next year. The budget for fiscal year 2015 includes \$35 million for a repayment. The amount needed above that will be taken from sales tax receipts.

Lawmakers also tapped the ATF to shore up the General Fund. In 2012, voters approved a \$437 million transfer over three years. That money must be repaid by 2026.

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Alabama to extend prison rehab contract

Decatur Daily

July 5, 2014

Mary Sell

The Alabama Department of Corrections wants to extend by 14 months and \$9.1 million a contract with a New Jersey company to provide substance-abuse counseling, rehabilitation and training to prison inmates.

The contract, which will total \$27.4 million since 2012, is on the agenda for Thursday's Legislative Contract Review Committee.

According to a summary on the committee's agenda, services provided under the contract with Community Education Centers Inc. help "reduce prison crowding by transitioning medium security inmates to work release/community centers."

Community Education Centers started providing educational and vocational services for the state in 2007, DOC spokeswoman Kristi Gates said. She said 634 inmates graduated from various programs in fiscal year 2013.

Many state prisons are at nearly double their intended occupancy.

Gov. Robert Bentley last month announced a study under the Justice Reinvestment Initiative, a program partly funded by the Department of Justice, the Associated Press reported. Bentley said the hope is to have ideas before lawmakers in the 2015 legislative session.

Other contracts on Thursday's agenda include a two-year, \$390,000 agreement with Dothan Security Inc. to provide guards at the Alabama Statehouse.

Food law class

The Alabama Legislature this year passed the Alabama Cottage Food Law, which broadens where people who make a limited amount of baked goods and other foods in their homes can sell their products.

Products that can be sold include canned jams and jellies, dried herbs, candies and baked goods. Homes do not have to be inspected by the health department, but food producers are required to label the food in a way that says it has not been inspected. A department-approved food safety course is required. The Cottage Food Law applies only to those who earn \$20,000 or less a year selling their goods.

The law went into effect this month. Prior to its passage, homemade, non-hazardous foods could be sold only at state-sanctioned farmer's markets and non-profit or religious and civic food sales.

The Limestone County Office of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System will hold an informational and certification meeting on the new rules at 2 p.m. July 14. Call the Limestone County Extension Office at 256-232-5510 for more information.

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Target 'respectfully' requests no guns in stores

Trussville Tribune

July 2, 2014

Gary Lloyd

TRUSSVILLE — Target has “respectfully” requested that shoppers not bring firearms into their stores, according to a notice the retailer posted on its website.

Target interim CEO John Mulligan shared the note with Target team members Wednesday.

Mulligan noted that as has been seen in the media, there’s been a debate about whether shoppers in communities that permit “open carry” should be allowed to bring firearms into Target stores.

A Target store
photo courtesy of Target Corporation

“Our approach has always been to follow local laws, and of course, we will continue to do so,” the notice states. “But starting today we will also respectfully request that guests not bring firearms to Target – even in communities where it is permitted by law.”

The notice states Target has “listened carefully to the nuances of this debate and respect the protected rights of everyone involved.”

“In return, we are asking for help in fulfilling our goal to create an atmosphere that is safe and inviting for our guests and team members,” the notice states. “This is a complicated issue, but it boils down to a simple belief: Bringing firearms to Target creates an environment that is at odds with the family-friendly shopping and work experience we strive to create.”

Target has a location on U.S. Highway 11 in Trussville.

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President's failed immigration policies creating chaos and economic hardship for Americans, Sen. Jeff Sessions says

Al.com

July 4, 2014

Leada Gore

The growing problem at America's borders is due to President Barack Obama's failed immigration policies, Sen. Jeff Sessions wrote in a pre-4th of July op-ed piece for the National Journal.

Sessions, R-AL, ranking member of the Senate Budget Committee and a senior member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, has been an outspoken critic of the administration immigration and amnesty policies. That criticism increased in recent weeks as a flood of unaccompanied minors have poured across the southwestern border of the U.S., creating a housing and, some fear, a health crisis.

This week, the Department of Homeland Security announced they intended to relocate some of those young illegal immigrants to a federal facility in Anniston. DHS later backed off the plan and said the Federal Emergency Management Agency building is no longer under consideration as a housing location.

In the July 3 op-ed, Sessions said the president has "engaged in a sustained campaign to strip away Americans' immigration protections.

"There is no doubt that the president's lawlessness has now produced a humanitarian crisis. But more important — and much too little discussed — is the crisis he has produced for the American citizens and communities who are left with the tab. Washington has profoundly failed in its lawful duty to the American people," Sessions said.

DHS is spending about \$252 a day per child to care for as many as 53,000 unaccompanied minors that have entered the country since Oct. 1, 2013. That cost is expected to reach \$2 billion this year.

Sessions said the cost of caring for those who enter the country illegally hurts average Americans.

"We owe our first obligation to the citizens of this country, and yet the last year has been consumed by an immigration debate centered on the needs of immigration lobbyists and politicians," Sessions wrote "The ultimate expression of this failure of priorities was the Senate's immigration bill. During a time of low wages, high unemployment, and surging welfare rolls, the Senate bill doubled the existing and expansive rate of legal immigrant and guest-worker admissions into the U.S.

"On this July Fourth, it is time to focus squarely on the needs of the American people who have given their blood and sweat to deliver us this magnificent Republic."

Towards that end, Sessions offers several suggestions:

Stop promoting amnesty. Instead, send a clear message to the world: If you attempt to come here unlawfully, you will be sent home. And send a message to our neighbors in Latin America: If

you do not accept repatriation of your citizens who entered unlawfully, you will not be provided any more legal-immigrant visas.

Protect the workplace. Protect the jobs and wages of lawful residents. This can be done by expanding, as previously planned, the effective and easy-to-use workplace verification tool known as E-Verify, used to confirm a job applicant's legal status. Senate Democrats have blocked this measure.

Remove the tax-credit magnet. According to the IRS inspector general, in 2010 the U.S. improperly paid out \$4.2 billion in taxpayer money to illegal immigrants in the form of the additional child tax credits — often to support children who are not even living in the United States. We can end this practice by simply requiring a valid Social Security number, as the IRS inspector general has recommended. Senate Democrats have blocked this measure, too.

Help our unemployed get back to work. With a record 58 million working-age Americans not working, we need to get our people off unemployment, off welfare, and into good-paying jobs that can support a family. Doubling the already large and continuing flow of legal immigration, as the Senate bill proposed, clearly works against this goal.

Create the conditions for rising wages. It is the job of lawmakers to represent all citizens, not just the denizens of Wall Street and Silicon Valley, and certainly not the narrow financial interests of international corporations with facilities spread across the globe. As long as we provide employers with an ever-increasing supply of low-wage workers from abroad, American wages are not going to rise. If a job is tough, or difficult, or in high demand, why shouldn't wages go up?

Challenge the president's lawlessness. The president made clear with his Monday announcement on executive actions that he plans to go even further in not enforcing America's immigration laws. Congress simply has no choice but to use its substantial constitutional powers to confront the president's lawlessness. And if the Senate Democratic majority continues to empower this illegality, then they should be exposed publicly and held to account for doing so. To violate even further his constitutional requirement to enforce the law — regardless of what other measures are taken — will ensure that the border crisis continues.

Those steps, Sessions said, would go a long way towards easing the current immigration crisis while addressing it in the long run as well.

"The Americans who bravely fight our wars, dutifully pay their taxes, and live their whole lives by the rules have every right to expect and demand that their representatives act faithfully on their behalf. Let that be our resolve on this July," he wrote.

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Roby: Record high gas prices result of Obama trying to 'please radical environmentalists'

Yellowhammer News

July 6, 2014

Cliff Sims

Rep. Martha Roby (R-AL2) had some strong words for the President Barack Obama over the holiday weekend, blaming the president's administration for gas prices spiking to the "second highest level ever for this time of year."

Here's an excerpt from an email blast Roby sent out Sunday evening:

Summer in the South is heating up, and that means barbecues, baseball games, and beating the heat at a nearby swimming pool.

Unfortunately, it also means American families are feeling the pinch of high energy costs. Planning to take the kids on that drive to the beach? Rising prices at the pump will make it expensive, as gasoline is at the second highest level ever for this time of year: more than \$3.60 a gallon. Fuel costs are also driving up grocery prices, and we all know what those summer electric bills can look like.

The Obama Administration's "just say no" mentality on developing domestic sources of energy isn't helping. The President and his policies are clamping down on new exploration projects, penalizing electricity producers, and refusing to approve needed energy infrastructure like the Keystone Pipeline. That kind of stubbornness might please radical environmentalists, but it hurts American families.

We have abundant energy resources in this country. Now we need to enact policies and build infrastructure that allow those resources to be delivered efficiently.

According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), the average price of a gallon of regular unleaded gasoline in the United States was \$1.838 the week President Obama took office. The average price is now \$3.704, an increase of over 100 percent. And that's not even the highest prices Americans have seen at the pump. That record was reached the week of May 9, 2011 when the average price for a gallon of regular unleaded reached \$3.965.

The record-high costs of gas and other products that American families directly consume likely contributed to the results of a recent Quinnipiac survey in which Americans ranked President Obama the worst U.S. President since World War II.

Roby pointed to three energy-related bills passed by the Republican-controlled House last week as evidence that GOP lawmakers are working to provide relief to families struggling with rising prices.

"It's time for the Senate and the President to say 'Yes' to energy to bring down costs for families and create American jobs," Roby concluded.

A funding bill for energy and water development and related agencies is expected to reach the House floor this week.

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Former State Senator and Ag Commissioner Albert McDonald dies at 83

Al.com

July 7, 2014

Leada Gore

Former State Senator and Agriculture Commissioner Albert McDonald of Huntsville died Sunday. He was 83.

The son of a farmer, McDonald went on to run a successful cotton farm before turning his attention to politics. In 1974, McDonald began the first of two terms in the Alabama State Senate representing District 6.

He served as Alabama's Commissioner of Agriculture and Industries from 1983-1991 and was appointed by President George W. Bush to serve as State Director of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Services Agency. McDonald was actively involved in efforts to eradicate the boll weevil and was credited with his work towards passing legislation important to Alabama farmers.

McDonald's son, Stan McDonald, served two years as Limestone County Probate Judge. His son-in-law is current U.S. Rep. Robert Aderholt.

Funeral arrangements are pending.

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Does Alabama fuel tax discriminate against railroads? U.S. Supreme Court to again hear appeal

Al.com

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Kent Faulk

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama – For the second time in nearly four years the U.S. Supreme Court has agreed to weigh in on CSX Transportation Inc.'s lawsuit that says the State of Alabama discriminated against it and other railroads by forcing them to pay sales taxes on fuel while their competitors - trucking and barge companies – are exempt.

At stake for the state is at least \$5 million a year in sales tax revenues and potential refund claims of more than \$10 million, according to the state.

Last week the U.S. Supreme Court granted the State of Alabama's request to hear its appeal of an 11th Circuit Court of Appeals decision in the case. That 11th Circuit ruling last year stated "the sales tax is indeed discriminatory and that the state has not offered a "sufficient justification" for exempting CSX's competitors."

This is the second time the Supreme Court has weighed in on the case.

Here is a synopsis of the case's lengthy history through the federal courts:

- CSX files a lawsuit in 2008 against the Alabama Department of Revenue, claiming the railroad is discriminated against in paying a 4 percent state sales tax for diesel fuel while its main competitors – trucking and barges--do not.
- A federal judge dismissed the complaint and the 11th Circuit affirmed the dismissal based on a previous court ruling that a railroad could not challenge its competitors' exemptions from a sales tax as discriminatory.
- CSX appealed and in 2011 the Supreme Court overruled the 11th Circuit's decision and held that CSX could challenge the tax as discriminatory.
- The case was sent back to the district court, which conducted a trial in 2012. U.S. District Court Judge Abdul Kallon issued an order holding that Alabama's sales tax did not discriminate against CSX. The judge reasoned that because the state's motor carriers paid a roughly equivalent amount in taxes pursuant to the State's fuel excise tax. The judge ruled CSX had not offered evidence regarding discrimination as it relates to water carriers.
- In 2013 the 11th Circuit reversed Kallon's decision, saying the tax did discriminate against the railroads.
- In October 2013 the State of Alabama this time asked the U.S. Supreme Court to review the 11th Circuit's ruling that favored of the railroads.
- The state notes in its appeal that truckers already pay a separate motor fuel tax. The state also argues that appeals courts around the country and at least two Supreme Court Justices – Thomas and Ginsburg – have been split on the issue. The state argued in its appeal that the two justices would have held that exemptions do not discriminate against a railroad "so long as they do not single out or target rail carriers as compared to the general class of commercial and industrial taxpayers as a whole."

In agreeing to hear the case again the Supreme Court stated that in addition to the questions presented by the state, both sides are to brief and argue another question: Whether, in resolving a claim of unlawful tax discrimination a court should consider other aspects of the State's tax scheme rather than focusing solely on the challenged tax provision.

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Nonprofits' contraceptive cases next for Supreme Court justices

The Associated Press

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WASHINGTON -- How much distance from an immoral act is enough?

That's the difficult question behind the next legal dispute over religion, birth control and the health law that is likely to be resolved by the Supreme Court.

The issue in more than four dozen lawsuits from faith-affiliated charities, colleges and hospitals that oppose some or all contraception as immoral is how far the Obama administration must go to accommodate them.

The justices on June 30 relieved businesses with religious objections of their obligation to pay for women's contraceptives among a range of preventive services the new law calls for in their health plans.

Religious-oriented nonprofit groups already could opt out of covering the contraceptives. But the organizations say the accommodation provided by the administration does not go far enough because, though they are not on the hook financially, they remain complicit in the provision of government-approved contraceptives to women covered by their plans.

"Anything that forces unwilling religious believers to be part of the system is not going to pass the test," said Mark Rienzi, senior counsel for the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, which represents many of the faith-affiliated nonprofits. Hobby Lobby Inc., winner of its Supreme Court case last month, also is a Becket Fund client.

The high court will be asked to take on the issue in its term that begins in October. A challenge from the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana, probably will be the first case to reach the court.

The Obama administration argues that the accommodation creates a generous moral and financial buffer between religious objectors and funding birth control. The nonprofit groups just have to raise their hands and say that paying for any or all of the 20 devices and methods approved by government regulators would violate their religious beliefs.

To do so, they must fill out a government document known as Form 700 that enables their insurers or third-party administrators to take on the responsibility of paying for the birth control. The employer does not have to arrange the coverage or pay for it. Insurers get reimbursed by the government through credits against fees owed under other parts of the health law.

Houses of worship and other religious institutions whose primary purpose is to spread the faith are exempt from the requirement to offer birth control.

The objections by religious nonprofits are rooted in teachings against facilitating sin.

Roman Catholic bishops and other religious plaintiffs argue that filling out the government form that registers opposition to contraceptives, then sending the document to the insurer or third-party administrator, is akin to signing a permission slip to engage in evil.

In the Hobby Lobby case, the justices rejected the government argument that there was no violation of conscience because the link between birth control coverage and the outcome the employer considers morally wrong was slight.

Just hours after the Hobby Lobby decision, the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta granted a temporary reprieve to the Alabama-based Eternal Word Television Network. Judge William H. Pryor Jr. said in a separate opinion in that case that the administration "turns a blind eye to the undisputed evidence that delivering Form 700 would violate the Network's religious beliefs."

But the Supreme Court could draw a distinction between subsidizing birth control and signing a document to deputize a third-party to do so, said Robin Fretwell Wilson, a family law specialist at the University of Illinois College of Law.

"Think about how thinned down that objection is," Fretwell Wilson said. "The court might say that is a bridge too far."

Judge Karen Nelson Moore of the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Cincinnati said the document is a reasonable way for objecting organizations to inform the insurer, but that the obligation to cover contraception is in the health law, not the form.

"Self-certification allows the eligible organization to tell the insurance issuer and third-party administrator, 'We're excused from the new federal obligation relating to contraception,' and in turn, the government tells those insurance companies, 'But you're not,'" the judge wrote.

People on both sides of this argument are looking to the Hobby Lobby case for clues about how the justices might come out in this next round.

In a Supreme Court filing, the Justice Department said the outcome strongly suggested that the court would rule in its favor when considering the nonprofits' challenge.

"The decision in Hobby Lobby rested on the premise that these accommodations 'achieve all of the Government's aims' underlying the preventive-health services coverage requirement 'while providing greater respect for religious liberty,'" the Justice Department wrote, quoting from Justice Samuel Alito's majority opinion. The legal filing was in opposition to an emergency plea from Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois, to avoid having to fill out Form 700. Wheaton is one of only a few nonprofits not to have won temporary relief in its court fight.

Rienzi, who also represents Wheaton, wrote in reply that the government is wrong to assume that the Hobby Lobby decision "blessed the accommodation." He noted that Alito specifically said the court was not deciding whether the administration's workaround for nonprofits adequately addressed their concerns.

On Thursday, the court, with three justices dissenting, allowed Wheaton to avoid using the form while its case remains on appeal. Instead, the college can send written notice of its objections directly to the Health and Human Services Department rather than the insurer or the third-party administrator. At the same time, the government can take steps to ensure that women covered by Wheaton's health plan can get emergency contraception the college won't pay for.

Several legal experts said that perhaps a simple revision to the government document at the center of the dispute could resolve matters.

"I think the question will come down to does the government really need them to tell the insurance companies or can you reword the form," said Marc Stern, a religious liberty specialist and general counsel for the American Jewish Committee. The faith-affiliated charities "might win a redrafting of the form. I don't think they can win an argument that says we can do absolutely nothing," Stern said.