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Tuesday, March 11, 2014

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FULL TEXT

House education budget trades raises for health insurance spending

WSFA

March 10, 2014

Max Reiss

MONTGOMERY, AL (WSFA) -

The budget that the House Education Budget Committee will consider later this week includes additional funding for PEEHIP, the Public Education Employees Health Insurance Program.

Overall, the House budget includes \$48 million for PEEHIP, cash the Alabama Senate had assigned to pay for a 1 percent bonus for all teachers and Post secondary Education employees, among other things.

PEEHIP covers more than 300,000 lives and faces a more than \$200 million shortfall.

"That amount would allow the board who makes decisions about increases and costs to the members to minimize the changes that would adversely affect PEEHIP members," said Leura Canary, Chief Legal Counsel for the Retirement Systems of Alabama, the agency that runs PEEHIP.

Without the \$48 million, PEEHIP members, who pay base premiums of \$15 for individual coverage and \$170 for family coverage, faced the prospect of steep increases.

The Senate budget proposal would have left the PEEHIP board with decisions to make regarding how best to deal with \$972 in new costs.

"There was no guarantee that those costs would have been shifted to the members," Canary said. "All decisions are made by the PEEHIP board."

House Education Budget Chairman Bill Poole said the legislature has to choose between a raise for teachers or attempting to keep health insurance premiums at a similar level for another year.

"We just don't have the tax receipts to pay for everything we want," said Rep. Poole, R – Tuscaloosa, last week.

Poole released a statement today where he asserts his budget proposal as the most responsible one submitted to date considering the Senate spending plan would have led to an eventual pay cut for teachers because the 1 percent bonus wouldn't have been enough to cover insurance premium hikes.

"A pay raise does no good if the recipient has to pay every dime of it, and perhaps some extra, toward higher insurance premiums if PEEHIP went under funded," Poole said.

Gov. Robert Bentley proclaimed last week that he would veto an education budget that didn't include both a 2 percent pay raise for teachers and Post secondary Education employees, in addition to fully funding PEEHIP.

The Speaker of the House responded to that threat by saying the governor's budget is merely a recommendation and that the legislature is the branch that does the actual appropriating of funds.

The House Ways and Means Education Committee is expected to approve Poole's latest budget proposal Wednesday.

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Sen. Paul Sanford hopes changes can ease concerns about marijuana oil bill

The Associated Press

March 10, 2014

MONTGOMERY, Alabama — A Huntsville legislator is working on changes to a bill that he hopes will persuade the Senate to approve the use of marijuana oil to treat children's seizures.

Republican Sen. Paul Sanford of Huntsville and other advocates plan on Tuesday to unveil the changes, which Sanford said should ease some concerns about the measure he has proposed.

Sanford's bill was on the Senate's work agenda Thursday, but the Senate broke for the weekend without getting to it. Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh, R-Anniston, said he expects it to be back on the work agenda when the Senate resumes work Tuesday afternoon.

Families with children suffering from frequent seizures due to epilepsy have been visiting the Legislature for two months in an effort to emphasize the potential good marijuana oil can do and to dispel fears about its legalization.

Greg Gibbs of Madison has been pushing his granddaughter's stroller along the halls, introducing 19-month-old Charlotte Dolton to legislators and explaining that she has a form of epilepsy called Dravet Syndrome. Because of that, she suffers frequent seizures.

"Each seizure causes brain damage, so we are fighting the clock," he said.

Gibbs' family wants to be able to treat her seizures with a marijuana plant extract called cannabidoil, also known as CBD oil. Sanford's bill and similar legislation offered in the House by Republican Rep. Mike Ball of Madison do not legalize the oil, but give patients and their caretakers a justifiable defense if charged with drug possession. Those in possession of the oil would have to have written proof of a diagnosis such as a seizure disorder.

Gibbs said the evidence he has seen from other states where the oil is available has convinced him it would reduce his granddaughter's seizures significantly and keep her from suffering brain damage.

He said the oil is produced from marijuana that is grown to be low in tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC, the main psychoactive substance in marijuana. "It can't get anybody high," he said.

Gibbs tells people the legislation has nothing to do with a broader medical marijuana bill that has been introduced this session or with recreational marijuana. "There is marijuana pot and then there is miracle marijuana," he said.

Barry Yarbrough of Haleyville is also walking the halls, but without his 14-year-old granddaughter, Allie Swann. Her parents moved her from Haleyville to Colorado last fall to be able to use the marijuana oil to legally treat her epilepsy. "She probably wouldn't be alive now if not for going out there," he said.

Sanford said the biggest challenge his bill faces is legislators' concerns about voting for anything pertaining to marijuana in an election year when their opponents might use it against them.

Yarbrough said he understands legislators' concerns, and he was skeptical until he saw the change in his granddaughter.

"She has never gone two or three days of her life without a seizure. She went 21 days without a seizure and her motor skills have improved," he said. "We were hoping for a 10 percent change. We are at 60 percent."

If Sanford's bill passes the Senate, it would still have to be passed by the House and signed by the governor. Ball's bill has not yet been considered by the House.

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Pregnancy clinic director discusses Alabama's safety measures for abortion clinics

WSFA

March 10, 2014

Tyrone McCoy

COLUMBUS, GA (WTVM) -

Governor Robert Bentley signed the Women's Health and Safety Act into law last year requiring abortionist to be able to admit patients to local hospitals.

A law that Carol Henschel, Executive Director of Sound Choices Pregnancy Clinic says is an important safety measure.

"Any time there's a surgical procedure done, it ought to be uniformed that a clinic has the same standards of any other hospital or surgical facility," she said.

The act forced many facilities to close their doors. New Woman All Women Health Care in Birmingham was cited for inadequately trained staff and hospitalizing patients in 2012 and later shut down.

Its operator is the woman widely regarded as the 'abortion queen' Diane Derzis -- who also owns the Columbus Women Health Organization. It's something that raises safety concerns with Henschel.

"Why would one facility be different than another if indeed it is owned by the same company," she quizzes.

Henschel works to offer pregnant women options that sometimes lead to abortion, and she says the women she's referred to the clinic have had similar instances.

"For instance, we had one woman who came in, had an abortion for twins because she was told they didn't have kidneys and found out later that was not the case," Henschel explains.

Because of mistakes like this, Henschel urges local and state officials to ensure that -- if these women choose to have the procedure -- they can do so safely.

"That would regulate staffing, qualifications of those staff, the cleanliness of the place and the instruments that they use," she adds.

To date, there are still upwards of 800 abortion clinics in the U.S. I have reached out to the director of the Columbus Women's Health Organization for a comment and to see if the facility has faced similar violations. My calls have not yet been returned.

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Bill pending in Alabama Legislature would allow home-schooled students to play on public school sports teams

The Associate Press

March 10, 2014

MONTGOMERY, Alabama — Some parents of home-schooled children are supporting proposed legislation that would allow their kids to play competitive sports with public school students.

HB 503 by Rep. Mary Sue McClurkin, R-Indian Springs, was approved by a House committee last week.

The Montgomery Advertiser reports a home-schooled 15-year-old Dothan boy tried out for a local high school football team and practiced with the squad until he was told he was ineligible to play days before the first game.

The Alabama High School Athletic Association requires students to be enrolled in the school they're representing to play sports.

Council for Leaders in Alabama Schools legislative coordinator Jim Chestnutt spoke out against the idea during a public hearing last week, saying that allowing students who are home-schooled to compete with public school teams would be unfair.

The boy's mother says the local team for home-schooled students didn't have enough players.

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Alabama prison staffing declines, but overtime eats up half of savings

Al.com

March 11, 2014

Brendan Kirby

During the nadir of the Great Recession, when Alabama's general fund budget sustained sharp cuts, the Alabama Department of Corrections stopped replacing corrections officers who retired or quit.

Brian Corbett, a spokesman for the department, recalled corrections Commissioner Kim Thomas taking office amid a financial crisis in 2010.

"In the next couple years, due to budget constraints, we were forced to cut recruiting programs, and as a result, staffing numbers began to go down," he said.

Despite cutting more than \$12.6 million in salaries from fiscal year 2011 to fiscal year 2013, however, the state ended up saving only a little more than half that amount on payroll because of rising overtime costs.

According to an October corrections report, the most recent one available, staffing was 61 percent of authorized strength. The gap was even larger than that at some facilities. Corbett pointed out that no matter how low staffing levels go, though, prisons need a certain number of people guarding prisoners around the clock.

"As the physical number of bodies who are able to work goes down, overtime has to go up," he said.

Staff cuts do not result in meaningful savings unless the state can close a prison. And with prisons hovering near 200 percent capacity, that is not likely anytime soon.

"In my 12 years here, closing facilities has never been an option," Corbett said.

Overall spending on salaries has remained relatively flat over the past five years, according to statistics provided by prison officials. In the fiscal year that ended in September, the prison system's total payroll stood at \$172.6 million, down slightly from the \$173.6 million that the department spent in fiscal year 2009. That figure does not include health and retirement benefits, which added another \$63.4 million in fiscal year 2013.

From fiscal year 2009 to fiscal year 2012, overtime spending stayed between 7 percent and 9 percent of total payroll. But the overtime portion jumped 22.8 percent from fiscal year 2012 to 2103, rising to 11.1 percent of payroll costs.

State Rep. Steve Clouse, R-Ozark, said the statistics underscore the difference between prisons and other parts of state government.

"I think that's one of the things we've seen in the prison system, unlike other departments," said Clouse, who chairs the general fund budget committee. "It's not like you can take furlough days

on a Friday, for instance, like the Department of Human Resources or the Historical Commission.”

Clouse noted that the Legislature last year approved a \$17 million increase for the Corrections Department to hire more guards. Increased staffing should reduce overtime costs, but Corbett it takes time to build staffing levels back up.

He said the corrections academy takes three months to complete. Depending on when an applicant is hired, it could be two more months before the next available academy class. Corbett said in extreme cases, it can be as long as six months before a new corrections officer starts the job.

“It slows the whole process down,” he said.

Prospective corrections officers must pass a background check. Convictions for a felony and certain misdemeanors disqualify an applicant. Those requirements, Corbett said, are set by the Alabama Peace Officers’ Standards and Training Commission.

Clouse noted that funds from the federal government’s stimulus program bolstered the prison system’s budget in fiscal years 2010 and 2011 and now have run out. That has left lawmakers trying to keep the prisons running on a series of stop-gap measures and one-time funding sources, he said.

“We’re getting down to the point where we need to put another \$2 to \$300 million into the general fund on a regular basis to do things like remedy the prison system,” he said.

Clouse said the general fund draws money from non-growth sources of revenue, which has squeezed all non-education spending.

“We’re trying to find more money for prisons,” he said.

Given recent trends, that is not going to be easy.

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Department of Corrections hires national consulting firm to improve conditions at Tutwiler

Montgomery Advertiser

March 11, 2014

Kala Kachmar

The Alabama Department of Corrections has hired a national consulting firm to improve conditions at the Julia Tutwiler Prison for Women in Wetumpka, a facility that’s been plagued by a culture of sexual abuse and violence for decades.

The Moss Group, based in Washington, D.C., specializes in criminal justice management and sexual safety in confinement. The company has worked in all 50 states, and is known for being “progressive” when it comes to sexual safety responses, Prison Commissioner Kim Thomas said.

“They’re going to review policies, processes in place and the material that we use for training,” Thomas said. “They’ll be mentoring and coaching staff and making sure we’ve got the support structure in place to continue the reform efforts we’ve already implemented.”

In January, the Human Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice released a scathing 34-page report detailing what it called systemic problems at Tutwiler that have allowed its staff to continue to sexually abuse and harass inmates.

The report noted that the culture of abuse still existed despite previous reports from the DOJ’s National Institute of Corrections and the Equal Justice Initiative, a nonprofit Montgomery-based legal firm that has detailed reports of sexual abuse and violence at Tutwiler and other facilities.

A letter to Gov. Robert Bentley from the DOJ said the conditions at the facility were unconstitutional, and that it would expand its investigation of Tutwiler.

After the NIC assessment, Thomas issued a 58-point directive in January 2013 to address each problem and recommendation it made.

Thomas said the consulting firm is going to help the DOC further the reforms issued in last year’s directive as well as help the state enforce the federal Prison Rape Elimination Act.

He said the cost of hiring the firm hasn’t been finalized, but the money will come out of ADOC’s budget. A contract between The Moss Group and the state should be finalized by next month, Thomas said.

Thomas said ADOC has used the group for training in the past.

The Moss Group has already looked at the NIC’s recommendations and the DOJ’s report, and have been on site to assess the facility and the measures that have already been implemented. Thomas said he’s working with the firm to come up with between five and 10 strategies that will benefit the staff and offenders at Tutwiler.

Thomas said he expects about 12 of the firm’s 80 consultants from all over the country, many of whom specialize in different areas of corrections, will be visiting and assisting at Tutwiler. He said policy and procedural changes, as well as PREA compliance, will benefit all prisons in the system.

After the firm “gets their arms around” the situation, the plan is to start making changes as they’re identified, Thomas said.

“I think we’re also going to need to start thinking outside the box, whether it’s (for) Tutwiler or the system as a whole,” said state Sen. Cam Ward, R-Alabaster, who is also chairman of the joint

legislative prison oversight committee. “We can spend more money here or there, but all we’re doing is staying ahead of the controversy.”

Ward said he’s supportive of ADOC’s decision to hire the firm. He said all Alabama’s prisons need reform, but Tutwiler is a “special case” because of the seriousness of the allegations.

“It definitely merits a special investigation,” he said.

Ward has also been spearheading an effort to get Alabama selected by the Council on State Governments Justice Center for a comprehensive assessment of the criminal justice process in the state.

Robert Coombs, a spokesman for the Justice Center, said last month that only a handful of states are eligible to formally apply, and only a half-dozen are chosen for the six- to 18-month assessment that will help determine policy reform.

The program is funded by the DOJ, and requires that all three branches of government in a state commit to the effort. In January, the Alabama Senate passed a resolution creating the Prison Reform Task Force, which would work with the Justice Center on the application.

Coombs said the program doesn’t address prison conditions or abuse. He said the program is designed to help states get a better handle on its prison population and doing a better job of making sure that recidivism rates are as low as possible. Alabama is also known for its overcrowded prisons, which are currently at about 200 percent capacity.

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Ala. committee holds hearing on Common Core bill

The Associated Press

March 11, 2014

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — A legislative committee will hold a public hearing Tuesday morning on a proposal to let local school systems opt out of the Common Core curriculum standards.

Republican Sen. Scott Beason, a frequent critic of Common Core, is sponsoring the legislation. The Gardendale senator says local school officials should be able to decide for themselves about the standards.

The bill would let school systems stop using Common Core and implement an alternative curriculum for those subject areas.

Opponents of Beason's bill say it would cause chaos across the state to have different school systems using different standards.

The Senate Education Committee has set aside two hours for the public hearing.

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Saraland City Schools passes resolution against anti-Common Core bills

Al.com

March 11, 2014

Sally Pearsall Ericson

SARALAND, Alabama – The Saraland City Schools district has joined the chorus of school officials denouncing Senate Bill 443, the proposed legislation to allow districts to opt out of using the Alabama College and Career Ready Standards, also known as Common Core.

On Monday night, the Saraland school board passed a resolution expressing its opposition to 443 and also to Senate Bill 380, which calls for a repeal of the standards and would require the State Department of Education to revert to the English standards from 1999 and math standards from 2003.

Both bills are sponsored by Sen. Scott Beason, R-Gardendale.

The Mobile County school board also passed a resolution on Monday against Senate Bill 443. Mobile County schools Superintendent Martha Peek traveled to Montgomery on Tuesday to testify before the Senate Education Committee about how the bill would affect the district's curriculum, teacher training and instructional resources.

“Our board opposes both of these bills,” Saraland schools Superintendent Aaron Milner said Monday night after the school board meeting.

“We’ve already bought books and software; we’ve already trained teachers” for the Common Core standards, Milner said.

“This bill is far from being fiscally conservative,” he added, pointing out that Senate Bill 443 calls for the creation of a Standards Advisory Commission to evaluate test results.

The bill would require an alternative curriculum to be implemented in each system that opts out of using the Common Core standards.

If implemented, Senate Bill 443 could lead to the state's 134 school systems each teaching a different curriculum, said Bill Silver, president of the Saraland school board. Also, he said, the initiative would not be well received by employees of businesses and industry that have recently located in the region.

The Mobile County and Saraland City Schools resolutions also noted that Senate Bill 443 would usurp the authority of the State Board of Education to implement statewide standards.

The Chickasaw school board will pass a similar resolution this week, according to Kyle Kallhoff, superintendent.

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Local school boards oppose education bills

Times Daily

March 11, 2014

Jennifer Edwards

MUSCLE SHOALS — Two bills under review in the Alabama Senate have local school boards banning together in opposition.

Senate Bills 443 and 380 both address the removal of Alabama College and Career Readiness Standards from Alabama public schools, a move local superintendents and board members said would cause student achievement to backslide.

SB443 calls for a moratorium on the standards until at least 2017, while SB380 would completely repeal the English and math standards developed in 2010.

Both bills were introduced by Sen. Scott Beason, R-Gardendale.

The Lauderdale County, Muscle Shoals and Tuscumbia school boards have passed formal resolutions opposing what is being termed an attempt to undermine public education.

Florence is expected to pass a similar resolution at today's board meeting.

The locals boards joined school boards across the state in opposing the bills.

The standards are derived from Common Core national standards but were catered to address Alabama's educational needs.

Muscle Shoals school board member Terri Snipes, a former high school math teacher, said the personalization of the standards to Alabama's needs is often overlooked. She said they were developed through collaboration with educators, parents and business leaders.

"The Alabama standards are ours," she said. "They include Common Core, as well as additional content. They are rigorous and require a lot out of our teachers and students. The standards will allow Alabama and Muscle Shoals students to reach new heights in academic achievement."

Beason has called Common Core "an unproven curriculum."

The national education standards have split Republicans. Advocates maintain the standards improve education in the state; opponents call it federal intrusion.

Leadership in the Statehouse, including Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh, R-Anniston, have said they don't want to deal with controversial Legislation this session, including Common Core.

Marsh is a co-sponsor of the bill that puts a moratorium on Common Core expansion and gives local systems an opt-out alternative.

Other lawmakers, and Gov. Robert Bentley, have said the Common Core decision should be left up to the state's elected school board.
'No federal control'

"The sentiment (in the House) is that we want to make sure that there is no federal control of our curriculum," Speaker of the House Mike Hubbard, R-Auburn, said earlier this month. "But we also believe we have an elected board of education and that's their job ... from a policy standpoint, that is their job."

State Superintendent Tommy Bice has been a proponent of the state's adoption of some Common Core Standards, now known as the Alabama College and Career Ready Standards.

SB443 has a public hearing this morning in Montgomery. It will be voted on in committee Wednesday. From there, it would have to go to the entire Senate and then the House.

Also on Wednesday, the Senate Education Policy Committee will vote on a bill that would allow Alabama voters in November to decide if the state's school superintendent should be elected rather than appointed. That bill is also from Beason.

Officials with the Alabama Association of School Boards call the bill a "train wreck", lowering standards for students, weakening accountability for parents and taxpayers and stalling efforts to make the state nationally and internationally competitive.

Association board Director Sally Howell said SB443 would bypass the democratically elected state Board of Education by allowing local school boards to opt out of College and Career Ready Standards for math and English language arts, which means, "school boards would be forced to use 20th century standards."

The resolution passed by the Muscle Shoals board said systems would revert back to 1999 learning standards for English and 2003 standards for math.

Howell said the bill would dismantle the state testing and accountability systems adopted by the state board and replace it with a system that requires students not be tested on the materials currently being taught in every Alabama public school.

"The bill is clearly punitive to any board that does not wish to dismantle its curriculum and go back in time," Howell said.

Muscle Shoals Assistant Superintendent Judy Pugh said she has no doubt students will suffer if the academic standards are abandoned.

"There seems to be little thought about what a disservice this would be to students," Pugh said. "They will not be prepared to be competitive in all parts of this global economy."

Pugh said there is also a fiscal downside. She said textbooks, digital content and other resources that align with the college and career ready standards have been purchased and are being utilized in classrooms. Turning back now would render many of those resources useless.

‘Decreased standards’

Florence Superintendent Janet Womack said she hopes the many school boards around the state opposing the bills send "a strong and consistent message that we don't want decreased standards for our children and we are in support of Plan 20/20. "

Womack questioned if the bills' approval would offset the school districts' accreditation status.

"The standards are actually the minimum of what we teach," she said. "It also could lock in our ability to use resources outside the state and we certainly rely on expertise outside Alabama. It's amazing, the lack of reason within the Legislature on this. There would be no autonomy to push rigor and excellence in the school system."

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Hartselle board opposes bills to weaken Common Core

Decatur Daily

March 11, 2014

Briana Harris

HARTSELLE — The Hartselle Board of Education today approved a resolution opposing two Alabama Senate bills that would weaken the Common Core education standards.

Senate Bill 380 would repeal the Common Core education standards until 2017. Senate Bill 443 would let local school boards opt out of the Common Core education standards and change them as they see fit, as long as they don't lower academic standards below what they were before Common Core took effect. The bills were proposed by Sen. Scott Beason, R-Gardendale.

“If passed, these bills would render irrelevant Plan 2020,” Superintendent Vic Wilson said at this morning’s board meeting. “If these standards fail, it is up to the state board of education and us (Hartselle school board) to repeal it.”

Plan 2020 is an initiative by state Superintendent Tommy Bice that will measure how Alabama students are progressing toward college- or career-readiness.

The school board will send a letter to all the senators in support of the bills stating their stance on the matter. Wilson said he also plans to send the letters to Sen. Arthur Orr, R-Decatur, so that he is also aware of how the board feels.

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New photo voter IDs to be available at county registrars' offices and from traveling van
The Associated Press
March 10, 2014

MONTGOMERY, Alabama — Voters who don't have a valid photo ID to use in Alabama's elections can get one free at county board of registrars' offices.

Alabama's chief election official, Secretary of State Jim Bennett, said Monday that registrars' offices in every county will be offering the free IDs, starting this week. The offices are open during regular courthouse hours, he said.

In addition, the required photo IDs are available in the secretary of state's office in the Capitol and, starting March 17, from vans that will be visiting all 67 counties. Their schedules will be announced soon.

"We are covering the state in a broad way," Bennett said.

After Republicans took control of the Legislature from Democrats, they passed a law in 2011 to require a photo ID to vote. The law takes effect with the primary election June 3.

"We think it will help improve our voting system. Voters, of course, ought to be who they claim to be," the Republican secretary of state said.

Many types of photo IDs can be used, including an Alabama driver's license, Alabama non-driver ID, state-issued ID, federal ID, passport, Alabama public or private college ID, college ID from a state college in another state, military ID and employee ID from a federal, state, county or city government.

The secretary of state's office reports that a check of voting records with the state Department of Public Safety shows 20 percent of Alabama's registered voters, or about 500,000 adults, lack a driver's license or non-driver ID issued by the Department of Public Safety. Bennett estimated half of that group has one of the other acceptable forms of photo IDs.

Those without a proper ID can get one free by going to a registrars' office, the secretary of state's office or one of the vans with documents showing their full legal name, date of birth and address.

Examples of photo IDs that can be used to obtain a free voter ID include a high school ID, an ID from a private employer and a hospital or nursing home ID. Non-photo IDs with a person's full legal name and date of birth can be used, including a birth certificate, marriage record, military record, Medicaid or Medicare document, or official school transcript.

The voter will get a paper ID initially, but should get a permanent ID by mail within two weeks. The permanent IDs don't expire like a driver's license would, Bennett said.

The secretary of state's office reports it is spending about \$800,000 to implement the law. That includes equipment from Police & Sheriff's Press in Valdosta, Ga., van travel and a media campaign, he said.

More than half the states have enacted photo ID laws for voting. Some have not taken effect because of legal challenges or delayed implementation dates.

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The debate over photo voter ID rages on as Alabama's law goes into effect

Yellowhammer News

March 11, 2014

Cliff Sims

Republicans delivered on a campaign promise in 2011 by passing a law requiring Alabama voters to show a photo ID before being allowed to vote. The law finally goes into effect for this year's primary elections, which are set to take place June 3.

Numerous types of photo IDs can be used by voters, including an Alabama driver's license or non-driver ID, college ID, military ID, government employee ID, federal ID or passport. However, the Alabama Secretary of State's office said today that they believe roughly 250,000 adults in the state do not currently have any form of photo identification.

For those folks, the State of Alabama is offering a free voter ID, which can be obtained at any local county board of registrars' or Dept. of Public Safety office or at the secretary of state's headquarters in Montgomery. Forms of non-photo ID that can be used to obtain a free photo ID include most IDs with a person's full legal name and date of birth. Fishing and hunting licenses, social security cards, birth certificates, marriage records, military records, Medicaid and Medicare documents and school transcripts are all acceptable.

Vans from the secretary of state's office will also be fanning out across the state in the coming weeks to deliver IDs to individuals who cannot make it to the local offices. A schedule for the van deployments will be released in the days ahead.

But even as Alabama's photo ID law goes into effect, the national debate surrounding the politics behind voter ID rages on.

Liberals continue to say voter ID laws are an assault on the voting rights of minorities, while conservatives say its a necessary step to ensure the sanctity of elections.

Here's a brief timeline of some notable voter-ID related events that have taken place over the last couple of years.

- On June 10, 2011, the Alabama legislature on the final day of the 2011 session passed a law requiring Alabamians to show photo ID at the polls before voting.

- On March 5, 2012, a large crowd of Alabamians led by MSNBC pundit and renowned race baiter Al Sharpton protested the voter ID law.

“How do you justify Alabama’s new voter laws when widespread fraud just doesn’t exist?” Sharpton asked Republican State Rep. Jay Love.

“Well, I’ll disagree with you, in the last three years, we’ve had three people convicted of voter fraud in Alabama,” Love responded.

“Thousands of those people can’t vote because of three people in the last three years?” Sharpton shot back. “Because they don’t have state ID, they don’t drive, they don’t have passports. They will not be able to vote.”

Love rebutted, “I don’t know of anybody that will be denied the right to vote. And we provide a free state ID in Alabama for those individuals that don’t have a driver’s license.”

- On March 12, 2012, the US Justice Department blocked a photo ID law from going into effect in Texas.

“There is no proof that our elections are marred by in-person voter fraud,” said Attorney General Eric Holder.

- On April 9, 2012, James O’Keefe, a conservative activists well known for his unique brand hidden-camera journalism, posted a video proving he could easily get poll workers to give him ballots for political celebrities.

“You’re on our list and that’s who you say you are — so you’re ok,” a polling work told O’Keefe as he attempted to vote as “Eric Holder.”

- On August 28, 2012, 1,431 votes were cast in a municipal election in Uniontown, Ala., which only had 1,140 people over the age of 18 living in the town at the time.

When asked by the Tuscaloosa News about the number of registered voters compared with the town’s population, the Uniontown city clerk and election manager replied, “I haven’t given it a thought.”

- On June 17, 2013, the US Supreme Court ruled that states cannot require proof of citizenship for an individual to be added to the voter rolls.

“[This] Court ruling marks an important victory for voters... across the nation whose right to vote has been under attack with discriminatory voter identification laws that have been enacted in states like Arizona, Alabama and Georgia,” U.S. Rep. Terri Sewell, D-AL07, said in a statement after the ruling.

- But barely a week later, On June 25, 2013, the US Supreme Court ruled Section 4 of the 1965 Voting Rights Act unconstitutional in *Shelby County v. Holder*. That ruling freed from federal

oversight states that previously had to have changes to their voting laws cleared by the US Justice Department, effectively ending the Obama DOJ's fight against state voter ID laws.

"The Alabama of today is vastly different than the one of a half century ago, and the time for us to be freed from the burden of federal oversight is long overdue," Alabama House Speaker Mike Hubbard said in reaction to the Court's ruling. "Today's ruling clearly states that our constitutional rights as Alabamians take precedence over the wants and whims of liberal Justice Department bureaucrats in Washington, D.C. Starting today, Alabama will be able determine its own destiny when it comes to campaigns, elections and voting procedures in our state."

- On Feb. 25, 2014, Vice President Joe Biden said he hopes Congress will "modernize" the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to counter the "hatred" behind voter ID laws in Alabama, North Carolina and Texas.

"These guys never go away," Biden said of supporters of voter ID. "Hatred never, never goes away. The zealotry of those who wish to limit the franchise cannot be smothered by reason."

What do you think? Are voter ID laws needed in Alabama, or are the discriminatory?

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Lawmaker proposes bill to lure California brewer to Alabama; state's small brewers not included in legislation

Anniston Star

March 11, 2014

Tim Lockette

MONTGOMERY -- A debate over who can brew beer and run a restaurant in the same site may come to a head in the Alabama Legislature this week.

Two similar bills, one in the House and one in the Senate, would allow beer companies that make more than 25,000 barrels of beer per year to open a restaurant on the site of their brewery.

So far, there's no brewery in Alabama that comes even close to making that much beer. Sen. Dick Brewbaker, R-Montgomery, is hoping to change that.

"There's a major brewer that wants to open a brewery east of the Mississippi, and they're taking proposals," said Brewbaker, sponsor of one of the bills. "This bill is attempting to create a situation where they could come here."

Brewing beer is a relatively new industry in Alabama, but a growing one. Twenty-nine small craft breweries have popped up across the state in recent years, each of them producing a locally-made brew that's sold to beer connoisseurs.

"Our goal is not to get Alabamians to drink more beer," said Jason Wilson, president of the Gadsden-based Back Forty Beer Co. "It's to make sure that more of the beer sold in Alabama is from Alabama."

Wilson said that with about 12,000 barrels of beer produced in the past year, his company is probably the largest beer producer in the state. By contrast, he said, Anheuser-Busch produces well in excess of 100 million barrels, and smaller producers are still considered "craft" breweries if they produce less than 6 million barrels.

The spread of small breweries is due in part to recent changes in state law, such as the Alabama Brewpub Act, which allows small brewers to serve beer on the same site where it's made. To run a brew pub, a brewer has to prove, among other things, that it's operating in an area where brewing was done before Prohibition began in 1919.

Some state officials are hoping California-based Stone Brewing Co. will get into the act. The company, which makes more than 200,000 barrels per year, and sells some of its beer through large on-site restaurants, has put out a request for proposals in hopes of building a brewery east of the Mississippi.

Brewbaker said officials of the Economic Development Association, an industrial development lobbying group, asked for the bill, to give Alabama a chance to compete for the Stone brewery. Attempts to reach EDA director Jim Searcy for comment weren't immediately successful Monday.

Brewbaker said several Alabama counties -- including Lee, Madison and Jefferson -- want to submit proposals to get the brewery. According to Stone Brewing's request for proposal, a new brewery would have to be near a major freeway, and would include a restaurant at the brewery -- something that wouldn't be possible under current law, which allows brewpubs only at breweries that produce less than 10,000 barrels per year.

Alabama brewers say they'd welcome Stone to the state, but they also say Brewbaker's bill is flawed. It would create an easier path to opening a brewery-based restaurant, and would allow breweries to sell beer on-site for off-premise consumption, something Alabama's breweries can't do under current law. But those changes would apply only to breweries that make 25,000 barrels or more.

"It's kind of weird to put a minimum cap on it," said Dan Roberts, director of the Alabama Brewers Guild. Roberts and Wilson both noted that the guild promoted a bill this year that would allow the state's existing brewers to do off-premise sales. It's gone nowhere in the Legislature, they said.

Stone Brewing officials, meanwhile, are quick to point out that it didn't ask for Brewbaker's bill and isn't lobbying for it to pass.

"We do not have anything to do with it," said Sabrina Lopiccolo, a spokeswoman for Stone.

Brewbaker, the senator, said the 25,000-barrel minimum could be a negotiable part of the bill. But there's a limited time to negotiate, he said.

Stone Brewing is accepting proposals only until March 15, according to its website, and the door for getting a new bill through both houses of the Legislature is rapidly closing. Tuesday is the 23rd day of the Legislature's 30-day session.

"It's got to be this week, or not at all," Brewbaker said.

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SPLC says proposed changes to Alabama Accountability Act won't help students in failing schools

Al.com

March 10, 2014

Mike Cason

MONTGOMERY, Alabama --- The Southern Poverty Law Center already has a lawsuit against the Alabama Accountability Act.

An SPLC attorney said today that proposed changes to the AAA would make the law passed last year worse.

HB 558 by Rep. Chad Fincher would change the scholarship program that is part of the AAA.

But Fincher, a Republican from Semmes, says his bill would help make sure that in future years scholarships are available to help students attend better schools.

Fincher was the sponsor of HB 84 last year, the bill that was expanded into the AAA by Republicans on a conference committee and then passed with almost no debate over the shouts of Democrats.

The AAA allows tax credits of about \$3,500 a year to help students zoned for failing schools transfer to private schools or better public schools.

Another part of the law allows scholarships for students in families earning no more than 150 percent of Alabama's median household income, about \$62,000, to help pay tuition at a private school.

The scholarships are not exclusively for children in failing schools.

Money not spent on scholarships for students in failing schools as of Sept. 15 each year can provide scholarships to other students who meet the income limit.

Fincher's bill would change the date to May 15. Fincher said it makes sense to move the date because the school year has already started by Sept. 15.

"It just helps families plan," Fincher said.

Geron Gadd, senior staff attorney for the SPLC, said that change would not fit the stated intent of the AAA, to help children in failing schools. Instead, taxpayer dollars could increasingly go to pay private school tuition for students who were never in failing public schools, she said.

HB 558 would make other changes to the AAA, which allowed the creation of organizations to award the scholarships.

Donations to the scholarship organizations pay for the scholarships, and donors receive credits on their state income tax.

Fincher's bill would:

--- Remove the \$7,500 cap on tax credits for individual and married couple donors. They could receive credits of up to half their tax liability.

--- Allow more types of business entities to claim the tax credits and allow the credits to pass through to the partners or shareholders of the businesses.

Gadd says those changes would do more to help well-heeled donors than students in failing schools.

"The combined changes of eliminating the individual cap and changing the type of business entities that can contribute make it easier for these SGOs to raise money from wealthy Alabama residents more quickly," Gadd said.

"And I think the reason that that matters is because it underscores the fact that this bill has far more to do with providing benefits to people who are already very well positioned than it does with helping children who are in failing schools and don't have adequate educational opportunities."

HB 558 would not change the \$25 million annual cap on total tax credits paid to scholarship donors.

Donations barely missed the cap last year, the first year of the program, with 866 donors qualifying for \$24.7 million in credits.

Fincher said the changes to the tax credits in HB 558 would help make sure the scholarship donations continue to flow. He said the program could provide scholarships to 5,000 to 7,000 students a year.

"That's why we want to hit the cap each and every year," Fincher said.

As of the start of this school year, the first year of the AAA, only 52 students transferred from a failing school to a private school under the new law. About 700 transferred to a public school within the same system, and 18 transferred to a public school in another system.

AAA proponents expect the numbers to grow.

Gadd says if the backers of the AAA want to improve it, they should provide help with transportation for students in failing schools who don't live near a non-failing school and change a provision that schools can reject transfers from failing schools. Under the law as it is now, many children in failing schools have no realistic option under the AAA because of those barriers, she said.

"It leaves out so many of the kids that it was purportedly intended to help," Gadd said.

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More Alabamians filing returns electronically

The Associated Press

March 10, 2014

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (AP) — The Internal Revenue Service says more Alabamians are filing their tax returns electronically.

The IRS says it received nearly 1 million electronic returns from Alabamians through March 7. That's a 3 percent increase over the previous year. The IRS says more than 375,000 of the tax returns were done by people who prepared their own returns and filed them electronically. That's an 8 percent increase over last year.

The IRS says people with household incomes of \$58,000 or less can use brand-name tax software free at the IRS website. IRS spokesman Dan Boone says that makes electronic filing free for many people.

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Use of Stolen Passports on Missing Jet Highlights Security Flaw

Washington Post

March 10, 2014

Eric Schmidt

WASHINGTON — As an armada of ships, planes and helicopters combed the waters south of Vietnam on Monday for any sign of a missing Malaysian airliner, aviation safety experts said the discovery that two passengers aboard the plane were traveling on stolen passports has revealed a major gap in airline security procedures developed since the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Interpol created a database of stolen and lost passports in 2002 that has grown to more than 40 million documents available for governments to screen for terrorists, smugglers or swindlers who travel the world illicitly. But according to the international law enforcement agency, only three countries — the United States, Britain and the United Arab Emirates — systematically screen travelers against the agency's database of stolen passports.

The two men with stolen passports who boarded the missing Malaysia Airlines flight from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to Beijing over the weekend did not have their passports screened. And last year, Interpol said, passengers around the world were able to board planes more than a billion times without having their passports checked against the database.

“If Malaysia Airlines and all airlines worldwide were able to check the passport details of prospective passengers against Interpol’s database, then we would not have to speculate whether stolen passports were used by terrorists to board MH 370,” Ronald K. Noble, Interpol’s secretary general, said in a statement on Sunday, referring to the Malaysia Airlines flight. “We would know that stolen passports were not used by any of the passengers to board that flight.”

Law enforcement and counterterrorism officials said Monday that the stolen passports might not have had anything to do with what happened to the jet. Still, they said, the episode had cast a spotlight on a flaw in security defenses built over the past decade to counter illicit travel and illegal trafficking of people, drugs and other contraband.

Renewed focus on the critical database, which has apparently gone underutilized, came on a day when the search for the missing jetliner and its 239 passengers and crew members was set back by a number of false leads that seemed to underline how little investigators knew about the location of the plane, which vanished on Saturday. Malaysian officials said late on Monday that they were expanding the search to a much wider area, including waters north of the Indonesian island of Sumatra, hundreds of miles from the aircraft’s last reported position.

One of the many vexing mysteries of the plane’s disappearance was the hunt for the true identity of the two passengers who used passports stolen from European tourists in Thailand in the past two years. A senior American law enforcement official said Sunday that Thai officials were investigating a so-called passport ring operating on the resort island of Phuket, where both passports were stolen and where, he noted, false documents were routinely used by drug smugglers.

Continue reading the main storyContinue reading the main story

Governments around the world have spent vast sums in the past decade to apply watermarks in passport books and encrypt authenticating information in the documents, all in efforts to combat increasingly sophisticated passport theft rings and forgers, the authorities said Monday. But the great majority of Interpol’s member nations still have not integrated the agency’s database of stolen passports beyond a central national office in each country — an office that can check a passport upon specific request or in an emergency, as member nations did after Malaysia Airlines published the passenger manifest of Flight MH370.

Some authorities said on Monday that a perception persists among some aviation officials that integrating Interpol’s database of stolen passports would be a costly, cumbersome process, a characterization that Interpol officials disputed. “It’s a nominal cost,” said one Interpol official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of agency protocol. “We’re not talking millions here.”

The official said Interpol was also willing to offer technical assistance to any member country that requested it.

“Whether or not this eventually involves terrorism, this incident has certainly brought to light an area of potential vulnerability on a global scale,” said Mark Dombroff, a former Justice Department official who is now a partner specializing in aviation issues in the Washington office of the law firm McKenna Long & Aldridge.

American investigators have repeatedly warned about the inability or unwillingness of foreign partners to address the use of fraudulent travel documents.

“In many countries, fraudulent travel documents, including fraudulent passports and visas, are easy to obtain, and could thereby be used by people who want to travel under a false identity,” said a June 2011 report by the Government Accountability Office, the investigative arm of Congress.

The report noted that the problem is common in Kenya, “where individuals with a similar appearance to a Somali-American with a legitimate travel document will fraudulently use this travel document for illicit travel.”

In addition, the report said, some countries’ failure to consistently report lost or stolen travel documents or access Interpol’s database of purloined passports “can facilitate the use of legitimate passports by impostors.”

The Government Accountability Office, citing State Department data, said in a May 2003 report that “the theft and forgery of passports in Belgium facilitated terrorists’ ability to travel freely.”

The WikiLeaks cables are replete with examples of American diplomats abroad warning of the dangers of fraudulent travel documents. “Taiwan authorities have repeatedly raised the issue of the rapid growth in the number of lost/stolen Taiwan passports,” said one cable in 2006, noting that those passports “are becoming the travel document of choice among globe-trotting criminals.”

Interpol’s database of stolen passports — one of 14 separate databases it operates — has grown from a few thousand passports and searches in 2002 to more than 40 million documents submitted from 167 countries, and more than 800 million searches per year. According to the agency, the United States searches this database annually more than 250 million times, Britain more than 120 million times, and the United Arab Emirates more than 50 million times.

The Interpol database provides results, the agency said in Mr. Noble’s statement, averaging 60,000 annual “hits,” matches of passports presented at airports or other ports of entry against the documents filed with the organization by member nations.

Many of those are individuals who have reported their passports lost or stolen, found them again, and used them, Interpol officials said. But the database has played a role in the arrest of many criminal fugitives and terrorism suspects, Interpol officials said.

In December, a 45-year-old American man was taken into custody at Manila's international airport after his passport was run against Interpol's databases and set off an alert as part of security operations surrounding the Southeast Games in Myanmar, according to Interpol's website. The agency did not identify the American.

In March 2011, a citizen of the Maldives wanted in connection with a 2007 terrorist bombing was arrested less than six hours after his passport set off an Interpol alarm as he traveled from Pakistan to the Maldives via Sri Lanka.