



Office of Senate President Pro Tempore Del Marsh
Press Clips
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[Senate committee OKs tougher rules for Alabama welfare recipients \(al.com\)](#)

Committees in the Alabama Senate today approved three bills placing new restrictions or requirements on welfare recipients and delayed a vote on a fourth.

The approved bills would ban spending of welfare dollars on alcohol and other items, require some welfare recipients to be drug tested and require welfare applicants to apply for three jobs before getting benefits.

"If individuals want assistance, three job applications put in is not such a burdensome requirement. That can be done in half a day," said Sen. Arthur Orr, R-Decatur.

The bills sailed through committee with little to no opposition. They must pass the House and Senate to become law.

"Well, it's an election year," said Carol Gundlach, policy analyst for Alabama Arise, which advocates for policies that help low-income families.

Gundlach made the comment when asked what she thought about the rash of bills affecting welfare recipients.

The Senate Fiscal Responsibility and Accountability Committee approved three of the bills.

One would require applicants for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families to be drug tested if they've had a drug conviction in the last five years. TANF recipients who had a drug conviction during the five years before their first TANF payment would also be tested.

The first positive test would result in a warning. A second would stop benefits for a year and a third would stop benefits permanently. Children of the recipients could keep getting payments through a third party.

Sen. Trip Pittman, R-Montrose, the sponsor, said the bill was not punitive but would be an incentive for those who use drugs to stop. He said working taxpayers should not have to support those who won't help themselves.

"I think it's reasonable from the standpoint of trying to help people and hold people accountable," Pittman said.

Gundlach of Alabama Arise said those with felony drug convictions are already banned from receiving TANF or food stamps.

As for Pittman's bill, Gundlach said Alabama Arise did not oppose it because it was carefully written and would protect the benefits for children.

"It really seems designed to help people who have addiction problems," Gundlach said.

Recipients could not be tested more than twice a year.

The committee approved a bill to require people to apply for three jobs before applying for TANF.

Orr, the bill's sponsor, said Pennsylvania saw a huge drop in TANF applications after passing a similar bill. He said Georgia, South Carolina and Mississippi also have job search requirements.

Gundlach said she was more concerned about the bill's provision to count the income of a "cohabiting partner" in calculating eligibility for TANF.

"Our concern is it reinstates what has been called the 'man in the house rule.' That person's income is counted toward TANF eligibility even if that person has no legal responsibility to support the children," Gundlach said.

The "cohabiting partner" could be an abusive boyfriend who refuses to help support the children in the household, she said.

Gundlach said the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1960s ruled against the "cohabiting partner" provision under the old Aid to Families with Dependent Children program, the welfare program before TANF.

She said Kansas is the only state that has the "cohabiting partner" rule now.

Under current law, Gundlach said, if a live-in boyfriend provides money to help support the children then that is counted as part of the mother's income in determining eligibility.

Orr said he planned to review the bill's definition of "cohabiting partner."

Another bill approved by the would prohibit TANF recipients from using TANF money to buy alcohol, tobacco or lottery tickets. They could not spend TANF money in bars, casinos, strip clubs, tattoo and piercing parlors or businesses that provide psychic services.

Orr said a federal law passed in 2012 required states to have in place by Feb. 22 of this year prohibitions against spending TANF money at liquor stores, strip clubs and casinos.

"That does no harm at all," Gundlach said. "People ought not be using TANF money to buy liquor anyway."

The committee approved another bill by Orr that would make it a crime to fraudulently obtain public benefits.

The fourth bill, delayed in a committee, would require recipients to perform 20 hours of community service each week.

Multiple bills get tough on welfare recipients (Montgomery Advertiser)

A bill that would require those receiving public assistance to perform at least 20 hours of community service was carried over in a Senate committee Wednesday, after committee members raised concerns and the sponsor said it was too broadly drafted.

The legislation, sponsored by Sen. Bryan Taylor, R-Prattville, had already drawn criticism from Alabama Arise, a nonprofit that works on poverty issues. Arise said the bill as drafted would overwhelm schools and nonprofits and did not accurately reflect the lives of those who receive assistance.

But two other Alabama senators are finding support for bills aimed at toughening the laws on welfare benefits, including requiring drug testing of some welfare applicants.

The Senate Fiscal Responsibility and Accountability Committee overwhelmingly approved four bills Wednesday that are sponsored by Republican Sens. Trip Pittman of Daphne and Arthur Orr of Decatur. The bills now go to the Senate, where Pittman's and Orr's roles as chairmen of the two Senate budget committees virtually assure them of getting the bills up for debate.

The bills apply to Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, the cash assistance program commonly called welfare. TANF is different from food stamps because it can be used for a variety of household expenses. Like food stamps, it comes on an electronic card similar to a credit card.

Pittman's bill provides drug testing for welfare applicants who have had a misdemeanor or felony drug conviction in the past five years. After three failed tests, they would lose their benefits permanently, but their family members would keep their benefits. The loss in Temporary Assistance to Needy Families would be \$25 to \$30 a month.

Even with the small loss, Pittman said the legislation would encourage welfare applicants to lead responsible lives and would show taxpayers that the Legislature is being accountable with their tax dollars.

If the bill passes the Legislature and gets signed by the governor, the main impact would be on misdemeanor convictions because Alabama already bans welfare benefits for felony drug convictions.

Orr's bills strengthen the penalties for lying to get welfare benefits, require applicants for welfare to have applied for three jobs, and prohibit liquor stores, bars, tattoo parlors, psychic networks and strip clubs from taking the electronic cards that carry the welfare benefits.

The federal government is requiring all states to have laws or regulations banning the use of electronic welfare benefit cards at liquor stores, casinos and bars by next month. Orr said his bill goes beyond the requirement by adding other businesses that have nothing to do with maintaining a family during tough times.

Orr said his job application bill is designed to get people to look for work before seeking government assistance. He said three Southeastern states — Georgia, Mississippi and South Carolina — have enacted similar laws requiring job searches to precede welfare applications. "If they haven't looked for a job, why should we turn around and reward them?" he said.

Democratic Sen. Linda Coleman said it could be hard for jobless people to find places to put in three job applications in some rural counties with high unemployment. "It's a feel good bill that gives false hope," she said.

Taylor, speaking in the Senate's Children, Youth Affairs & Human Resources committee, said his bill was modeled on similar legislation pending in Michigan and Mississippi, and would encompass anyone on public assistance who was able-bodied and not currently looking for work.

"There are plenty of projects out there that will help restore the values we need to place on a strong work ethic and restore dignity for those receiving public assistance," Taylor said.

The Department of Human Resources, which administers most federal assistance programs in the state, would be charged with developing a list of eligible organizations for community service. A DHR spokesman declined comment on the proposal Wednesday.

Carol Gundlach, a policy analyst with Alabama Arise, said the legislation as currently written did not have exceptions for individuals who may receive public assistance and lack transportation or the ability to work, such as the elderly or mothers of very young children. Gundlach also said the vast majority of those receiving public assistance, such as through the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), or food stamps, had jobs and would not have the time to commit to community service.

"The truth of the matter is most people receiving public assistance are working," she said. "They're working or trying to work."

Taylor said the bill was not intended for those who worked and received public assistance. The senator also said he hoped the legislation would be flexible enough to allow waivers to be granted in individual circumstances.

"We want to get away from the entitlement mentality that has trapped people in a cycle of poverty and dependence," he said.

Arise also raised concerns that the bill as written did not provide coordination with schools and nonprofits that would handle the community service participants.

Committee members seemed sympathetic to Taylor's concept, but criticized its execution. Sen. Linda Coleman, D-Birmingham, questioned whether DHR still had the resources to administer a community-service type program.

"For the last three or four years, we've been streamlining government," she said. "Now we are adding a huge, huge responsibility on an already short, streamlined staff in a department ... that has a lot of cases to try to fulfill."

Taylor said Tuesday that the bill as drafted was broader than what he had intended. The committee voted to carry over the bill for consideration at a future date. Taylor said he would meet with the individual senators to discuss their concerns.

Alabama legislators seek tougher welfare rules (AP)

By Phillip Rawls | The Associated Press

MONTGOMERY (AP) — Two Alabama senators are finding support for bills aimed at toughening the laws on welfare benefits, including requiring drug testing of some welfare applicants.

The Senate Fiscal Responsibility and Accountability Committee overwhelmingly approved four bills Wednesday that are sponsored by Republican Sens. Trip Pittman of Daphne and Arthur Orr of Decatur. The bills now go to the Senate, where Pittman's and Orr's roles as chairmen of the two Senate budget committees virtually assure them of getting the bills up for debate.

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enacted similar laws requiring job searches to precede welfare applications. "If they haven't looked for a job, why should we turn around and reward them?" he said.

Democratic Sen. Linda Coleman said it could be hard for jobless people to find places to put in three job applications in some rural counties with high unemployment. "It's a feel good bill that gives false hope," she said.

One of Orr's bills makes it easier for prosecutors to bring charges against people who lie on welfare applications. Alabama already is aggressive about prosecuting people who lie to get unemployment benefits. The state Department of Labor, which administers those benefits, reports six successful prosecutions so far this month. The punishment for those is usually a suspended sentence and a requirement to repay the money received.

John Hardy, spokesman for the Alabama Department of Human Resources, said the welfare agency is working with Orr and Pittman to make sure their bills are written so that they can be implemented, but Alabama doesn't have a history of widespread welfare abuse.

[Alabama Senate passes bill to reorganize legislative operations \(al.com\)](#)

The Alabama Senate tonight approved a bill to consolidate legislative operations under a newly configured Legislative Council.

The bill, by Sen. Jimmy Holley, R-Elba, would abolish several boards and move their power under the Legislative Council.

The bill would change the council membership. It would go from 31 members to 20 members, 10 each from the House and Senate.

The lieutenant governor would be a non-voting ex-officio member.

The Joint Fiscal Committee, Legislative Building Authority and Permanent Legislative Committee on Reapportionment would be abolished, and those boards' powers would move to the Legislative Council.

Republicans supporting the measure say it's another in their series of bills to streamline government. Last year they passed bills to consolidate law enforcement agencies and to create a cabinet position to coordinate information technology for state agencies.

But Democrats opposed Holley's bill as an unwise consolidation of authority.

"It's giving too much power to too few people," said Senate Minority Leader Vivian Figures of Mobile.

"I don't see it as a concentration of power," Holley said. "It's going from a dysfunctional 31-member committee to a 20-member committee."

Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh, R-Anniston, said under the change, the minority party would have proportionally more members on the council than before.

On the need to consolidate, Marsh said: "The left hand didn't know what the right was doing."

Democrats filibustered to try to stop the bill. But the Republican majority called for a vote to cut off debate, which passed.

The Senate then approved the bill by a vote of 18-15.

Three Republicans voted against the bill: Sens. Scott Beason of Gardendale, Paul Bussman of Cullman and Paul Sanford of Huntsville. The 11 Democrats and independent Harri Anne Smith of Slocomb voted against the bill.

Holley proposed a similar bill last year but it failed to win final passage.

Bill would extend state tuition benefits to peacetime veterans (Montgomery Advertiser)

The Senate Veterans and Military Affairs committee Wednesday approved legislation aimed at extending state tuition benefits to those in the military who served during peacetime.

Currently, state law allows the wife, widow or child of a veteran who served in wartime and had a service-related disability of 20 percent or more may have up to 100 percent of their tuition paid for at one of the state's public universities. The benefit does not include other fees. The Department was

told several years ago that it could not extend those benefits to those who met the other qualifications for the bill, but served during peacetime.

"Our department was very disappointed to not be able to extend benefits to peacetime veterans in Jan. 2011," said Sandy Speakman, general counsel for the Alabama Department of Veterans' Affairs. "We were told that legally, we could no longer do that."

Wartime service is determined by dates established by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. The VA considers the country to have been at war since the start of the Gulf War on August 2, 1990; spouses and children of anyone who has served in that time and suffered a qualifying disability could receive the tuition payment. The VA website says the end of the current wartime period must be set by presidential proclamation or law.

Under VA regulations, the most recent peacetime era ran from May 8, 1975 -- the end of the Vietnam War -- to August 1, 1990.

Sen. Bryan Taylor, R-Prattville, has for several years brought bills that would delete the wartime service requirement, though they have failed to get through the full Legislature. Taylor said Wednesday the legislation would allow equal treatment of all veterans.

"Everyone who signs up and puts on the uniform assumes the risk of going to war," he said.

It is not known how many people statewide would qualify for the benefit should Taylor's bill pass, though Speakman said the office has denied 228 applications for benefits under the bill. The bill would be retroactive to 2011; the Legislative Fiscal Office estimates the bill would cost the Education Trust Fund \$3.67 million in the current fiscal year; \$2.25 million in fiscal year 2015, which begins on Oct. 1, and a gradually declining amount of money in the following years, bottoming out to \$688,000 in 2020 and years after that.

The bill now goes to the full Senate.

[Committees approve effort to speed up executions \(al.com\)](#)

MONTGOMERY, Alabama -- The House and Senate Judiciary Committees this afternoon approved prosecutor-backed legislation to shorten the appeal time in death penalty cases.

Sen. Bill Holtzclaw, R-Madison, said the average stay on Death Row is 16 years and climbing. That's too long, he said.

"This is not about saving money. This is about justice," Holtzclaw said.

Currently, a person given the death penalty has a series of direct appeals, first to the Alabama Court of Criminal Appeals, and then to the Alabama Supreme Court and the U.S. Supreme Court. After those are complete, the defendant can begin Rule 32 appeals, post-conviction appeals that look at other issues such as the trial lawyer's competence.

The proposed legislation, dubbed "The Fair Justice Act", would run both sets of appeals simultaneously. Capital defendants would be required to file Rule 32 petitions within 180 days of filing their first direct appeal. Death Row inmates could still make federal appeals.

The committees held a public hearing yesterday. Defense lawyers say they fear that shortening the appeal time could lead to the execution of innocent people

Sen. Rodger Smitherman, D-Birmingham, said he agreed the appeal process was "entirely too long" but he feared there were not enough safeguards against the execution of innocent people. Smitherman abstained from the vote.

Sen. Vivian Davis Figures, D-Mobile, who said she is against the death penalty, cast the lone vote against the bill in the Senate committee.

The bill is backed by the Alabama District Attorneys Association and Attorney General Luther Strange.

"Death penalty appeals seem endless, with excessive delays that serve only to prolong pain and postpone justice for the victims of these heinous crimes," Strange said.

Death penalty appeal changes approved by Senate committee (Montgomery Advertiser)

A Senate committee Wednesday approved legislation aimed at shortening the time taken during the appeals process in death penalty cases.

The Senate Judiciary Committee voted 7 to 1, with one abstention, to approve the legislation, sponsored by Sen. Bill Holtzclaw, R-Madison. It now moves to the full Senate.

The legislation focuses on two of the three phases of a death penalty appeal process. In the first, known as a direct appeal, issues and facts of the case are addressed. The direct appeals process is followed by a phase known as a Rule 32 process, where issues such as the effectiveness of counsel and access to evidence are raised. Both appeal processes can go as high as the U.S. Supreme Court, and under current state law, the first round of appeals must be exhausted before the second can begin.

The proposal would put both the first and second rounds of appeals on a dual track process. If implemented, those convicted of a capital crime would have to file their Rule 32 petitions within 180 days of beginning the direct appeal process. In addition, a circuit court would have to rule on a Rule 32 appeal within 180 days of a direct appeal process being concluded.

Family members of crime victims testified in a public hearing Tuesday that the long appeals process can force them to relive the traumas their relatives suffered. Holtzclaw told the committee that most of those appealing the cases had been found guilty of their crimes.

"We can't lose sight of fact these people were found guilty in the jury process and condemned," he said.

Critics of the legislation said the state already provides inadequate counsel to death row inmates, and suggested the change in the appeals process would further burden a system straining to keep up. Sen. Rodger Smitherman, D-Birmingham, said he feared that trying to assuage the pain of crime victims could lead to those wrongfully condemned being sent to the death chamber.

"We're willing to take out all these folks who may be innocent," he said. "We're willing to take them out to address what you just said."

[On the 41st anniversary of Roe v. Wade, Alabama is slowly making pro-life progress \(Yellowhammer News\)](#)

On this day in 1973, The Supreme Court of the United States ruled in Roe v. Wade that abortion is legal in all 50 of these United States.

Four decades later, over 50 million unborn American babies — roughly 3,000 each day — have seen their lives snatched from them before they even took their first breath. In any other context that would be considered genocide on a scale the world has never seen.

Abortion By The Numbers

Americans United for Life, a national pro-life organization, last week released a report ranking the most pro-life states in the country. Alabama came in at number 20.

“I’ve noticed that everyone who is for abortion has already been born.” – Ronald Reagan

Alabama has long had one of the most pro-life electorates in the country. Unfortunately, our legislature for decades didn’t reflect that. Democrats who controlled the legislature until 2010 did little to nothing to protect the unborn. Thankfully, Republicans have started pushing in the right direction since becoming the majority Party.

Numerous pro-life bills have become law since Republicans took control.

The Pain-Capable Unborn Child Protection Act sponsored by Rep. Kerry Rich, R-Albertville, and Sen. Scott Beason, R-Gardendale, protects unborn children who are capable of feeling pain except when the mother “has a condition which so complicates her medical condition as to necessitate the abortion of her pregnancy to avert death or... substantial or irreversible physical impairment of a major bodily function.” Outside of that, this law states that “it is necessary to preserve the life of an unborn child.”

The Women’s Health and Safety Act sponsored by Rep. Mary Sue McClurkin, R-Indian Springs, improved and strengthened the standards of care at women’s clinics in Alabama. By requiring clinics that provide abortions to meet the same facility standards as ambulatory care centers and calling for doctors who provide abortions to have admitting privileges at local hospitals, this bill made it increasingly difficult for abortion clinics to remain open in Alabama.

“The right to life is the first among human rights.” – Pope Francis

The Best Interest of the Child Act sponsored by Rep. Mike Jones and Sen. Jerry Fielding, R-Sylacauga, cut down on the time it takes to move children out of foster care and into permanent homes in Alabama.

Several other pro-life bills did not, or have not yet, become law, mainly due to unfortunate timing.

For instance, in 2011, the Alabama Senate passed several pro-life bills at the very end of the session, not leaving enough time for the House to pass them and send them to the governor. Democrats,

especially Sen. Rodger Smitherman, D-Birmingham, filibustered every pro-life bill that came up for a vote, effectively "running out the clock" on the 2011 session.

Senator Greg Reed, R-Jasper sponsored a bill during that session that would have allowed the State of Alabama to opt out of allowing abortion coverage by health plans participating in the ObamaCare healthcare exchange.

Sen. Shad McGill sponsored a bill which stated that private health insurance plans and policies offered in Alabama "shall only offer abortion coverage through the purchase, by an individual policyholder, of a separate rider and through the payment of an additional premium for such coverage."

Sen. Gerald Allend, R-Tuscaloosa sponsored the Abortion-Inducing Drug Safety Act, which would have made it unlawful to administer any abortion-inducing drug to a woman without her receiving an exam by a physician beforehand. It would have also provided physicians with guidelines to follow in administering an abortion-inducing drug.

Sen. Phil Williams, R-Rainbow City, sponsored a bill that would have provided that the term "persons" as used in the Code of Alabama would include all humans from the moment of fertilization in the womb.

"A person is a person no matter how small." – Dr. Seuss

Several other pro-life bills are currently making their way through the legislature.

Yesterday, The Healthcare Rights of Conscience Act sponsored by Rep. Becky Nordgren, R-Gadsden, passed the Alabama House. The bill states that Alabama health care providers would have the right to refuse to participate in a specific service that violates their conscience if their objections are submitted in writing and placed on file prior to being asked. Services they could decline to perform include those related to abortion, human cloning, human embryonic stem cell research, and sterilization. This bill now goes to the Senate.

Rep. Paul Lee, R-Dothan, is also sponsoring the Adoption Tax Credit bill that provides a \$1,000 one-time tax credit to families who adopt an Alabama child. That bill is up in the house today.

We must continue to compassionately, yet boldly speak out in favor of every person's God-given right to life and encourage our legislature to keep pushing until Alabama's laws reflect the true character of its people.

Lawmakers describe adoption tax credit as pro-life legislation on Roe vs. Wade anniversary (al.com)

MONTGOMERY, Alabama – With Republicans tying it to today’s 41st anniversary of the Roe vs. Wade decision legalizing abortion, the House of Representatives approved a bill to give adoptive families a \$1,000 tax credit.

“This, to me, is a pro-life bill,” said sponsor Rep. Paul Lee, R-Dothan.

Lee, who is an adoptive parent, said pregnant women have the burden of deciding whether to abort or seek an adoptive family. “What we are trying to do is promote and encourage adoption,” Lee said.

The \$1,000 tax credit would go to families who adopt through a private adoption or who adopt a foster child in the custody of the Alabama Department of Human Resources. Both the adoptive parents and birth mother would have to be from Alabama to qualify for the credit.

Lee estimated that 2,500 adoptions last year would have qualified for the tax credit.

The bill was approved on a 72-23 vote.

Objecting lawmakers said that adoption should happen because of love, not monetary incentive.

Others said the state should do more to help children who do not get adopted from foster care or for families who take in children to keep them out of foster care.

“Those that are going to be helped are the ones that are really not in true need,” Rep. Laura Hall, D-Madison.

On the anniversary of the landmark Supreme Court decision, House Republicans plugged their record of anti-abortion legislation.

“I’m proud that under Republican leadership the Alabama House has prioritized life over the past three years and passed several meaningful pieces of pro-life legislation,” said House Speaker Mike Hubbard, R-Auburn.

Those bills included last year’s bill to put stricter regulations on abortion clinics and a 2011 law banning abortions after 20 weeks.

Cheryl Ciamarra, the board director of Alabama Citizens for Life, said she has been pleased with the legislation that has passed during the last three years, but said she thought lawmakers could do more.

Ciamarra said other states have a 48-hour waiting period before abortions, instead of the 24-hour requirement in Alabama. She said she would also like to see women inquiring about abortions given a list of places where they could obtain a free ultrasound.

Planned Parenthood filed a lawsuit challenging the clinic restrictions and accused lawmakers of trying to block access to abortion,

State Rep. Fincher decides not to seek re-election in northern Mobile County district (al.com)

State Rep. Chad Fincher, R-Semmes, will not seek re-election, becoming the second member of the local delegation to forgo another campaign for the State House.

Fincher said he would focus on his role as executive director of the Mobile Area Association of Realtors, a job he started in November.

"It's a very busy position and a lot of responsibility," he said. "I served two terms and feel like I accomplished a lot for Alabama."

Fincher's announcement comes two weeks before the deadline for candidates to qualify for the June primary, giving little time for potential candidates to weigh the pros and cons of making a run. District 102 covers northern and western Mobile County.

Fincher played a leading role in some of the centerpiece legislation that Republicans pushed through the Legislature after gaining control in 2010 for the first time in the 19th century.

He was a sponsor of the controversial Alabama Accountability Act, which offers tax credits to help parents of children in "failing" public schools pay for private school. The law also put up \$25 million to give residents and businesses a tax credit for donations to organizations that grant scholarships to low-income students.

Fincher also sponsored the Students First Act of 2011, which made it easier to discipline and fire public school teachers.

As executive director of the Realtors' group, Fincher serves some 1,300 members and manages the Multiple Listing Service, a database used by real estate agents to track property sales and prices.

Fincher said he is juggling those responsibilities while serving out his last legislative session in Montgomery.

"It's just been a balancing act," he said.

Fincher ran unsuccessfully for Congress last year in a special election to replace U.S. Rep. Jo Bonner, R-Mobile, who resigned in August. Fincher finished third in the Republican primary and then backed the eventual winner, Bradley Byrne.

In announcing he will not run for re-election, Fincher joins state Rep. Jamie Ison. The Mobile Republican announced in December that she would not seek a fourth term in District 101.

[Proposed bond issue seeks to replace textbooks with tablets in Alabama classrooms \(al.com\)](#)

MONTGOMERY, Alabama -- A House committee this morning delayed a vote on a proposed \$100 million bond issue to help Alabama schools replace textbooks with tablets.

The House Ways and Means Education Committee sent the bill to a subcommittee for study after legislators questioned tablet replacement costs and how much it would save, or cost, to switch from paper textbooks.

The bill would authorize up to a \$100 million bond issue to help schools obtain computer equipment, software, and digital textbooks.

"This bill is going to give an equal shot of moving into the twenty-first century education model," said bill sponsor Rep. Jim McClendon, R-Springville.

School systems would be required to put up a 25 percent match to obtain the funds, but the state would be able to waive the costs for poorer systems.

McClendon said some wealthier school systems have been able to provide tablets and laptops to students, while poorer school systems do not have the funds or the infrastructure to do so.

"It will level the playing field for these rural schools," McClendon said.

The program would be voluntary. School systems would choose whether or not to participate. Systems would apply for the funds describing how they want to use them.

McClendon said he believed a switch would ultimately cut the \$35 million-a-year that the state spends on paper textbooks.

"Say half the school systems switch to digital textbooks, then the cost of textbooks is cut by half," McClendon said

However, some committee members questioned if the state could take on more bond debt and if tablets should be bought on credit.

"We're borrowing and borrowing and borrowing," House Minority Leader Craig Ford, D-Gadsden, said.

Rep. Patricia Todd, D-Birmingham, said the state needed to put technology in the classroom, but she questioned the wisdom of borrowing money-- that will be repaid over 20 years - to obtain tablets that could rapidly out of date.

"The shelf life is going to be two or three years for these tablets before they are out of date," Todd said.

McClendon responded that many of the tablets will be leased and that technology infrastructure improvements will be permanent.

Ford argued the actual cost or savings of a switch to tablets was unknown.

"You can't project how many iPads are going to be stolen. You don't know how many iPads are going to need fixing," Ford said.

The committee vice-chairwoman asked the subcommittee to work quickly.

"It's not my intent to put it there to die. I don't want it to die," Rep. Mary Sue McClurkin, R-Indian Springs.

RSA says supporter's bill not necessary (TimesDaily)

MONTGOMERY — It's not a good sign for a lawmaker when the party he's trying to defend stands up in a committee meeting and says they don't support his bill.

Rep. Johnny Mack Morrow's bill to give Retirement Systems of Alabama chief David Bronner "total unilateral control" to make investment decisions failed in a House committee today.

Morrow, D-Red Bay, had a tough sell with the Republican-majority committee, but then legal counsel for RSA expressed concern about the legislation.

Neah Mitchell said RSA appreciates Morrow's efforts, but, "We do think there needs to be some fiduciary oversight." She later said that RSA feels its current oversight system is sufficient.

Morrow's legislation was prompted by a December resolution approved by the employees' retirement system board that will require investment recommendations made by Bronner to be reviewed and approved by a three-member investment committee. That's contrary to how RSA has operated for nearly 40 years, Bronner said. He always has been able to approve investment decisions by proxy.

Further discussion about the resolution, which takes effect Feb. 1, will take place during an RSA meeting later this month.

His bill is dead, but Morrow said he isn't done. He plans to introduce a resolution, to be voted on in the House, condemning the RSA board's action.

"The members of the retirement systems, current retirees and future, had a defeat with this vote, but we won't stop here," he said.

Sen. Roger Bedford, D-Russellville, is sponsoring the Senate version of the bill the House committee killed.

Bill would require party ties for primaries on voter registration lists (Montgomery Advertiser)

The House Constitutions, Campaigns and Elections Committee approved three election-related bills, including one that would redact the addresses of domestic violence victims on voter registration lists disseminated to the public.

The committee also sent a bill to subcommittee that would require Alabama voters to become registered members of a political party in order to vote in that party's primary election. Currently, voters are unable to register with a party.

"It enables people to register as a Democratic, a Republican or not register at all," said Rep. John Merrill, R-Tuscaloosa, who is sponsoring the bill.

Merrill said one benefit would be for those running for office. Parties would already have a list of its registered members to target. He also said it would prevent members of other parties from voting in primaries or runoffs they normally wouldn't vote in to skew the election results.

Merrill cited the gubernatorial race of 1986 as a prime example of altered results caused by Republicans voting in the Democratic runoff. The Alabama Supreme Court ruled that because crossover voting had taken place, Democrats had to hold another runoff election or select the Democratic candidate who lost as a result of the crossover voting.

If the bill makes it out of committee, Merrill said there would be a mechanism in place to allow people to change their party affiliation.

The bill leaves that up to the secretary of state's office and doesn't specify how long before an election voters would be able to change parties.

Thirty-one states have closed or semi-closed primaries, meaning voters have to be registered with a party or officially declare their party affiliation at the time of the primary, according to FairVote.org.

The bill will come back to the committee after the subcommittee meets to discuss it, Merrill said.

The committee also passed a bill that would redact the addresses of voters on voter registration lists who are victims of domestic violence, as well as voters who have custody of children who are victims of domestic violence.

Rep. Becky Nordgren, R-Gadsden, who is sponsoring the legislation, said the bill is simple and is meant to protect domestic violence victims.

Committee members discussed an amendment that could include redacting the addresses of assault victims and federal agents.

The other bills would change the way write-in votes are counted and allow public officials from other states access to voter registration lists.

In response to IRS scandal, Alabama House bill bans politically motivated audits (Yellowhammer News)

The Alabama House of Representatives on Tuesday approved a bill designed to prevent state revenue officials from maliciously targeting politically active individuals or groups.

The "Alabama Taxpayer Audit Protection Act," by Rep. Wayne Johnson, R-Ryland, makes it unlawful for the Alabama Department of Revenue as well as County and Municipal Governments and their agents to audit an individual or group because of their political beliefs or statements.

"It's no secret that Barack Obama and his Internal Revenue Service have targeted TEA Party groups and other organizations because of the political messages those groups actively promote," Johnson said. "While Congress will have to take steps to prevent President Obama from committing future abuses on the federal level, we can take action now to ensure that similar actions never occur on the state level. Our goal is to ensure that Alabamians never have to worry about their state government threatening them because of their political views."

Violating the act could result in the immediate loss of employment and is punishable by potential jail time and fines.

Johnson said the bill was drafted in response to revelations that the federal Internal Revenue Service had targeted various conservative political groups based simply upon their beliefs and statements.

Alabama's Wetumpka TEA Party was among the groups targeted, resulting in their president, Becky Gerritson, being called to testify before a Congressional committee last year.

"I'm telling my government that you've forgotten your place," Gerritson said in her testimony. "It's not your responsibility to look out for my well-being, and to monitor my speech. It's not your right to assert an agenda. Your post, the post that you occupy, exists to preserve American liberty. You've sworn to perform that duty. And you have faltered."

The Alabama Taxpayer Audit Protection Act now moves to the State Senate for consideration.

Summary of action in Alabama Legislature (AP)

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — A summary of action in the Alabama Legislature on Wednesday, the fifth meeting day of the regular session:

HOUSE:

- Approved a \$1,000 tax credit for Alabamians who adopt a child from Alabama. Goes to Senate.
- Approved a bill clarifying that the state's sovereign immunity from lawsuits applies to teachers and state employees when they are carrying out their official duties. Goes to Senate.

SENATE:

- Approved the governor's appointees to some state boards.
- Debated, but did not vote on, a bill to expunge some criminal court records.
- Approved a bill to restructure how the Legislature hires and supervises its staff. Goes to House.
- Approved a bill setting up a new procedure for the Legislature to approve or reject regulations proposed by state agencies. Goes to House.

COMMITTEES:

- Senate Fiscal Responsibility and Accountability Committee approved four bills to strengthen the regulations for getting welfare. Go to Senate.
- Senate Transportation, Utilities and Infrastructure Committee approved a bill to end the handling of telephone complaints by the state's utility regulatory board. Goes to Senate.
- Senate Judiciary Committee approved bills to expand the crimes covered by Alabama's death penalty law and to speed up executions by changing the appeal process. Go to Senate.
- House Judiciary Committee approved bills to expand the crimes covered by Alabama's death penalty law and to speed up executions by changing the appeal process. Go to House.
- House meets at 9 a.m. Thursday and Senate at 10 a.m.

Alabama's two big college towns have more jobs today than before recession (al.com)

Though the economy has been in recovery mode for some time, many U.S. metros still have fewer jobs today than they did before the great recession hit. That's true of several Alabama metros as well.

Of the 363 metropolitan statistical areas across the United States tracked by the Census, only about a third have as many jobs today as they did at the peak of the economic boom, a Wall Street Journal report notes.

Only two Alabama metros have more jobs today than before the recession -- and they're both college towns. In Auburn-Opelika, the economy supported more than 56,000 jobs as of November; in Tuscaloosa, there were 99,200 jobs. Both of those jobs figures have grown relative to the end of 2007.

Statewide, the number of jobs supported by the Alabama economy is down more than 6 percent relative to peak. In December 2007, Alabama supported an estimated 2,014,900 jobs. Today that number is down to 1,890,000, according to the latest estimate from the Department of Labor, a difference of nearly 125,000 jobs.

Anniston-Oxford, Dothan, Decatur, and Gadsden are each about 10 percent below peak employment. Montgomery, Mobile, and the Birmingham-Hoover areas are tracking more closely to the statewide trend, with each down about 6 percent.

Huntsville is a bit better off by this measure, with employment down by just 4.5 percentage points relative to peak.

Peak employment figures are included for each Alabama metro, as well as the state as a whole, in the table below.