



Office of Senate President Pro Tempore Del Marsh
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Legislature creates Alabama Workforce Council to advise colleges and schools (AP)

The Alabama Legislature agreed Thursday to create a council of business executives to advise state leaders on workforce development issues.

The Senate voted 28-1 to go along with changes the House made in a bill sponsored by Republican Sen. Paul Bussman of Cullman. The bill now goes to the governor, who said he will sign it into law.

Bussman's bill creates the Alabama Workforce Council, composed of business and industry leaders appointed by the governor and by other state officials. The group will advise the state's two-year college chancellor and state school superintendent on policies and programs affecting workforce development.

Supporters said the bill is part of the state's efforts to make sure Alabama has the skilled workers needed to recruit new industries and help existing industries expand.

Gov. Robert Bentley said the bill implements a recommendation of his College and Career Ready Task Force.

"There is nothing more important than job creation, and having a skilled workforce is one of the biggest components to economic development," Bentley said Thursday.

Alabama Senate bill: OK to say 'Merry Christmas,' 'Happy Hanukkah' in school (al.com)

The Alabama Senate has approved a bill that the sponsor says will keep education about Christmas and Hanukkah in public schools.

The Senate voted 22-7 Thursday for the bill by Republican Sen. Gerald Allen of Tuscaloosa. His bill now goes to the House for consideration.

Allen's bill allows schools to educate students about the history of traditional winter celebrations and allows student and staff to exchange traditional greetings.

Christmas and Hanukkah are the only celebrations mentioned in the bill. Democratic Sen. Quinton Ross of Montgomery tried to add the African-American observance of Kwanza, but his amendment fell two votes short of passing.

Allen says the bill should give clarity to what educators can do. Opponents say it will prompt a legal challenge.

Tracking the 2014 session: Summary of Thursday's action in the Alabama Legislature (AP)

A summary of action in the Alabama Legislature on Thursday, the 14th meeting day of the regular session:

HOUSE:

—Passed a bill saying a child who withdraws from a public school to attend an accredited online school will not be counted as a dropout. Goes to Senate.

—Approved a bill raising the fines for violations of pipeline safety standards. Goes to Senate.

—Passed a bill making it a crime to repair a car using fraudulent air bags. Goes to Senate.

—Passed a bill allowing the governor to declare a state of emergency for specific counties rather than declaring one statewide. Goes to Senate.

SENATE:

—Approved a bill saying public schools can teach students the history of traditional winter observances, including Christmas and Hanukkah. Goes to House.

—Passed a bill saying the licensing of a physician, optometrist, chiropractor or dentist can't be tied to the health care professional participating in any health insurance program. Goes to House.

—Passed a bill to expand the types of synthetic drugs considered illegal in Alabama. Goes to House.

AGENDA:

—House and Senate meet at 1 p.m. Tuesday.

2 crime-related bills pass Senate (TimesDaily)

MONTGOMERY — The list of illegal drugs in Alabama could get longer under Senate Bill 333. The bill, from Sen. Arthur Orr, R-Decatur, passed the Senate Thursday.

“It doesn’t expand punishments, it just adds these various synthetic compounds (to the list of illegal drugs),” Orr said.

He described the chemical compounds as “dangerous and mind altering” and said that new ones are popping up every year.

The Senate also passed a companion bill from Orr. Senate Bill 332, the Alabama Comprehensive Criminal Proceeds Forfeiture Act, says that any property or proceeds used in or derived from the commission of a felony is subject to civil forfeiture.

Orr said that currently there are different forfeiture laws for different types of crimes. Both bills now go to the House.

NRA president criticizes gun regulation, Alabama 'game check' (TimesDaily)

MONTGOMERY — Jim Porter, president of the National Rifle Association and an Alabama native, was at the Montgomery Statehouse this week talking to lawmakers about gun and hunting rights and the organization’s work on state and federal levels.

Wednesday evening, he spoke with members of the Alabama House’s Rural Caucus, a bi-partisan group of lawmakers.

Some of his comments follow.

On hunting rights:

"One thing that is very troubling to me, in many states, is that we have to fight hunting rules and regulations that are onerous, that are driving people away from hunting," Porter said. "They're just not going to do it."

"It troubles me that some of these things we're doing, even in this state, are going to take the little guy out of hunting. It's too expensive and they're not going to do it."

Porter criticized a new state "game check" program, which requires that hunters report to the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources the deer and turkeys they kill within 24 hours, or risk a fine. That rule was voluntary this year, but will be mandatory in the 2014-15 hunting season. Conservation officials have said it will help track the number of deer and turkeys in the state and offer county-by-county kill counts. Many states have similar rules.

"I expect this type of rule in New Jersey or Connecticut, but I don't expect it in the state of Alabama," Porter said. "To me, it is too much government intervention in our lives and I think it's extremely bad policy. It's going to drive hunters away and land owners are not going to do what the law requires. It is going to do the one thing lawmakers never want to do, pass a law that does not have the respect of the public and won't be followed."

On Forever Wild:

"In every legislature in this country, we are passing rights to access public hunting lands (legislation)," Porter said. "Just like the Forever Wild legislation was so important, because it had to do with access to hunting land."

Since it was established in 1992, Alabama's Forever Wild Land Trust has purchased more than 227,000 acres of land for public use, including hunting.

"We are looking to take that model of Forever Wild to other states."

On the NRA's "friendly incumbent" policy in politics:

"If you're our friend, we will fight for you and we'll get you elected," he said. "If you're our enemy, we'll get you beat. It's just that simple. ... We protect and work for and support our friends and we beat our enemies."

The NRA has about 5 million members, and that number is growing, he said.

On regulating where firearms can be carried:

"I refute the notion that giving someone a gun is going to make them a bad person," he said. "And that's basically what a state is saying when it regulates your rights – we don't trust you."

On court fights:

The NRA is involved in multiple court challenges to what it sees as anti-Second Amendment laws, including Chicago's ban on gun sales, which was overturned by a federal judge in January.

"We just had a favorable ruling out of Chicago, of all places, by an appointee of President Obama who agreed with us and said the City of Chicago's ordinances that banned the sale of firearms in the city are unconstitutional. He said that you have an individual right to keep and bear arms."

Porter was named NRA president in May 2013. He's a Birmingham attorney and his father was NRA president from 1951-1961.

[State House of Rep. bill changing Birmingham Water Works Board introduced a day after Senate version moves closer to vote \(al.com\)](#)

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama -- The State House of Representatives version of the bill to change the operation of the Birmingham Water Works Board was introduced today by Rep. Paul Demarco.

The bill from Demarco, R-Homewood, includes fewer changes to the five-member authority than the bill from Sen. Jabo Waggoner, R-Vestavia Hills, that was approved by a committee Wednesday and heads to the full floor for a vote.

Waggoner's bill would expand the board to include members from Jefferson, Shelby, Blount, Walker and St. Clair Counties, tilting the balance of power away from the city of Birmingham. The proposed new board would have nine members with five members appointed from outside Birmingham, putting the city in the minority.

While it does not speak to board expansion, Demarco's legislation retains the other proposed board change, including shorter terms and term limits, \$500 monthly caps on board pay and mandated public hearings before rate increases.

The bill is co-sponsored by representatives who are served by the Birmingham Water Works including, David Standridge whose district includes Blount and Jefferson Counties; Dickie Drake, of Jefferson and St. Clair Counties and Randall Shedd whose district includes Blount County.

The bill is assigned to the House Judiciary Committee.

Demarco for years has been a vocal critic of the Water Works Board, saying its operation was not representative of its entire customer base and its leadership indifferent when it came to accountability.

Water Works officials have countered, and have hired lobbyists and consultants to make their point. They point to the utility's sound financial record, clean water quality and voluntarily decreasing compensation as evidence of a well-run agency.

The city of Birmingham has also hired a team of lobbyists in its opposition to any legislation that would change the composition of the Water Works Board.

The City Council and Mayor William Bell have both agreed to a general statement against all the legislation, while at the same time making overtures for some type of compromise.

Bill that could cut down on local amendments at election time moves forward in Alabama Senate (Anniston Star)

by Tim Lockette

MONTGOMERY — A bill designed to reduce the number of local amendments that appear on statewide ballots moved forward in the Alabama Senate Thursday.

"We spend 90 percent of our time dealing with local issues," said Sen. Linda Coleman, D-Birmingham.

Coleman is the sponsor of a bill that would make it harder for lawmakers to force a statewide vote on countywide laws brought before the Alabama Legislature.

The Alabama Constitution of 1901 gives Montgomery control over many aspects of city and county government, requiring Constitutional amendments for many county-level rule changes. Some of those countywide amendments appear on the ballot only in the county they affect — but if a single state lawmaker disapproves of a countywide referendum, a statewide amendment vote is needed.

If Coleman's bill passes, it would take the opposition of three senators or nine House members to place a county issue on a state ballot.

Coleman said around two dozen county-level issues have been decided as statewide amendments since the year 2000. Most voters didn't know or care about the issues they were asked to vote on, she said.

"It's the uninformed public who have to decide on poultry farms, what kind of feed they can use, and what time they wake the cows up," she said. Coleman said she counted herself among the uninformed public. She said she no longer votes on such amendments.

Coleman's bill passed by a 3-2 vote out of the Senate's Constitution and Elections Committee, and heads to the full Senate for a vote. The committee's chairman, Sen. Bryan Taylor, R-Prattville, opposed the bill.

Taylor said the current system helps prevent counties from opting out of statewide laws and thus creating a hodgepodge of county laws.

"We end up creating a slew of counties and laws," Taylor said.

Nan Ekberg of Alabama Citizens for Constitutional Reform was on hand to watch the committee vote. The group is supporting several amendments, crafted by the state's Constitutional Revision Commission, intended to modernize the state's constitution. The Commission has endorsed an amendment reform proposal similar to Coleman's.

"That's what we call momentum," Ekberg said of the bill's passage.

So far, the Constitutional Revision Commission's suggestions have advanced slowly in the Legislature. A hearing on two other constitutional reform proposals Thursday morning was canceled due to the winter weather affecting the northern part of the state.

Despite the weather, neither the House nor the Senate had trouble getting a quorum of members this week, and both chambers passed a number of bills.

— The House voted 100-0 Wednesday to offer up to \$5 million in tax credits to people or businesses who donate to scholarships that would help high school students enter dual-enrollment programs for two-year college credit. Proponents of the bill say dual enrollment helps students leave high school with a job skill. The bill heads to the Senate for consideration.

— The Senate voted 22-7 Thursday in favor of a bill that explicitly states schools are allowed observe "traditional winter celebrations" including Hanukkah and Christmas. Senators rejected a motion to reconsider the bill and add Kwanzaa to the list of celebrations.

— The House voted 98-0 Thursday in favor of a bill that would allow schools to count students as transfer students, instead of dropouts, if they leave school to attend an accredited online school.

— A Senate committee voted Wednesday to approve a bill that supporters say will strengthen the Alabama Open Meetings Act. The bill would ban some "serial meetings" in which members of a governing body meet in small groups to decide an issue without holding an open meeting; and it would require the Legislature to establish rules that would ensure their meetings are open to the public.

— Sen. Del Marsh, R-Anniston, on Tuesday filed a bill that would allow Weaver to annex a parcel of land on Alabama 21, across the highway from Heroes American Grille. Heroes was annexed last year, shortly after the Legislature approved Sunday alcohol sales in the city. Mayor Wayne Willis said the annexation would encourage development of the parcel across from the restaurant.

Alabama House calls for Article V convention to amend U.S. Constitution (AP)

The Alabama House is calling on Congress to convene a state-led convention to amend the U.S. Constitution to impose limits on the federal government.

A resolution sponsored by Republican Rep. Ken Johnson of Moulton cleared the Alabama House on Thursday and now goes to the Senate. It proposes a convention under Article V of the Constitution. It would be limited to imposing fiscal restraints on the federal government, limiting the power and jurisdiction of the federal government, and implementing term limits on federal elected officials.

Johnson said, "The federal government under the Obama administration has become a rabid beast that oversteps its authority with regularity."

The Constitution has never been amended through an Article V convention.

Right on cue, Democratic politician makes insulting, racist remark about Clarence Thomas' marriage (Daily Caller)

Hours after Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas remarked that he has endured more racism from northern liberals than from southern conservatives, an Alabama politician demonstrated that southern liberals can be just as racist as their northern counterparts.

Alabama state Rep. Alvin Holmes, a Democrat and black man, derogatorily referred to Thomas as an "Uncle Tom," and said he doesn't like the esteemed Justice because Thomas is married to a white woman.

Holmes' remarks were reported by Mary Sell, a writer for The Times Daily. She said via Twitter:

Holmes later clarified that he believed he had been misinterpreted, and meant to say that some other people dislike Thomas because he is married to a white woman. The Democratic politician did, however, make it clear that he believes Thomas is an "Uncle Tom," according to The Washington Times. The derogatory expression is used to demean black people who are seen by other blacks—and by white liberals—as willing defenders of white interests.

The comment underscores one of the points that Thomas made during a speech at Palm Beach Atlantic University on Tuesday. He said that people today are more obsessed with race and identity politics than ever before, and that the most racist people he ever encountered were liberal elites, not southern conservatives. (RELATED: Clarence Thomas: Northern liberal elites more racist than southerners)

Conservative pundit Dan Calabrese said of the incident: "In fairness to Rep. Holmes, all he did was say publicly what many liberals say privately about Justice Thomas and his wife Ginni, who by the way is brilliant in her own right."

Federal judge strikes down Virginia same-sex marriage ban (Politico)

A federal judge ruled Thursday that Virginia's ban on same-sex marriage is unconstitutional.

"Tradition is revered in the Commonwealth, and often rightly so. However, tradition alone cannot justify denying same-sex couples the right to marry any more than it could justify Virginia's ban on interracial marriage," Judge Arenda Wright Allen wrote in a 41-page opinion (posted here).

Ruling on a lawsuit brought by a gay couple who lives in Norfolk, Allen said the state's prohibition on same-sex marriage could not be justified even under the most lax constitutional test for state actions: whether it had a "rational" connection to a legitimate state purpose. Her ruling will not immediately make marriage licenses available to same-sex couples in Virginia because she ordered that her decision be stayed pending an expected appeal.

(Also on POLITICO: Eric Holder to accord more recognition to same-sex couples)

"The Court is compelled to conclude that Virginia's Marriage Laws unconstitutionally deny Virginia's gay and lesbian citizens the fundamental freedom to choose to marry. Government interests in perpetuating traditions, shielding state matters from federal interference, and favoring one model of parenting over others must yield to this country's cherished protections that ensure the exercise of the private choices of the individual citizen regarding love and family," the judge wrote.

Allen's decision is in line with similar rulings in recent weeks from federal judges in Oklahoma and Utah, who ruled that bans on same-sex marriage in those states were unconstitutional. The judge in Oklahoma stayed the ruling pending appeal. The judge in Utah did not, allowing same-sex marriages to begin immediately, but the Supreme Court stepped in a couple weeks later and suspended the ruling.

Allen, who sits in Norfolk, is an Obama appointee confirmed to the bench in 2011. She's a former Navy JAG corps officer, federal prosecutor and federal defender.

(Also on POLITICO: Comcast readies for Washington war)

Last June, the Supreme Court struck down the key part of the federal government's law barring recognition of same sex-marriage. However, the justices sidestepped a ruling on whether states could constitutionally ban gay marriage. A slew of cases re-raising that question are now working their way through the courts. It seems inevitable that the Supreme Court will consider one or more of those cases in the two years or so.

In a statement, the American Foundation For Equal Rights said the "historic" decision "continues the national momentum toward marriage equality."

Freedom to Marry founder and president Evan Wolfson applauded the ruling, saying:

The bipartisan momentum for marriage is building at an unprecedented speed. In just the past several weeks, federal judges in Utah, Oklahoma, and Kentucky; the Attorney Generals of Virginia and Nevada; the Governor of Nevada, and now a federal judge in Virginia have all said that marriage discrimination against loving and committed gay couples is indefensible under our Constitution. There has been a fundamental shift in the legal landscape. America is ready for the freedom to marry and those couples in Virginia, on the eve of Valentine's Day, are ready to marry.

[Alabama man files federal lawsuit seeking recognition of same-sex marriage performed in Massachusetts \(al.com\)](#)

MONTGOMERY, Alabama --- A Montgomery man who married another Alabama man in Massachusetts is challenging Alabama's law prohibiting the recognition of same-sex marriages performed in other states.

Charles David Fancher was killed in a car crash north of Montgomery after his marriage to Paul Hard. The accident led to a wrongful death case.

The Alabama law prevents Hard from sharing in any proceeds from that case, according to lawyers with the Southern Poverty Law Center, which is representing Hard.

The SPLC announced Hard's lawsuit at a news conference at the federal courthouse in Montgomery this morning.

Hard's lawsuit seeks recognition of his marriage under the Equal Protection and Due Process clauses of the U.S. Constitution. His case seeks to invalidate parts of Alabama's Marriage Protection Act and Sanctity of Marriage Amendment.

Gay marriage bans face court challenges in other southern states. A federal judge on Wednesday struck down part of Kentucky's constitutional ban on same-sex marriage. Cases are also pending in Missouri, Louisiana and Texas.

At today's news conference, Hard described the hurt he felt when hospital workers refused to provide him any information about Fancher's condition after the accident. A receptionist told him that he was not a member of Fancher's family and that gay marriages were not recognized in Alabama. Hard

learned from a hospital orderly that Fancher had died after about a half-hour of trying to get information.

A funeral home director later insisted that Fancher's death certificate indicate Fancher was never married, citing state law.

"If I can spare one other person that kind of indignity and hurt, I would do it," Hard said today. "If I can let people know how this law unjustly and cruelly affects people, I will do it. And ultimately I hope that these laws are overturned so that it now longer can give folks permission to treat Americans as second-class citizens."

Hard, 55, who teaches counseling and psychotherapy at Auburn University Montgomery, is also seeking to have Fancher's death certificate changed to say that he was married.

Fancher, who was 53 when he died, was an information technology director at a trucking company in Birmingham.

They were married in May 2011, and the fatal accident happened during the night of Aug. 1, 2011. Fancher's car struck an overturned UPS truck blocking the northbound lanes of Interstate 65, according to Hard's lawsuit.

The wrongful death case was filed by the administrator of Fancher's estate. It is pending in federal court in Montgomery. Hard is not a party in that case. If Hard prevails in his lawsuit, he would be entitled to proceeds from that case.

Named as defendants in Hard's case are Gov. Robert Bentley, Attorney General Luther Strange and other officials, as well as the administrator of Fancher's estate.

The case was filed in December, but defendants were not served papers until today, the SPLC said.

If I can let people know how this law unjustly and cruelly affects people, I will do it.

Bentley stands by the Alabama laws and will fight the lawsuit, according to a statement from spokeswoman Jennifer Ardis.

"Governor Bentley will fight the merits of this lawsuit," Ardis said. "Like most Alabamians, the Governor strongly believes in the traditional definition of marriage, as being between a man and woman. He will work everyday to continue to protect the sanctity of marriage in Alabama."

A spokeswoman for Strange said the lawsuit was under review and that there would be no comment.

Alabama House Speaker Mike Hubbard, R-Auburn, issued a statement today about Hard's lawsuit. "This lawsuit is part of a coordinated liberal agenda that is designed to erode the conservative Alabama values that the citizens of our state hold close to their hearts," Hubbard said. "By an overwhelming vote in favor of the Sanctity of Marriage constitutional amendment, Alabamians strongly signaled their belief that marriage in our state exists only between a man and a woman. This Republican Legislature will continue fighting against the left-wing policies that Barack Obama and his liberal allies like the SPLC attempt to force upon Alabamians in spite of their deeply-rooted conservative beliefs. As I have noted before, the SPLC is nothing more than the ACLU with a southern accent."

U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder is pushing for more recognition of same-sex marriages in all states, including rights related to lawsuits and criminal cases.

David Dinielli, the SPLC's deputy legal director, said the SPLC supported Holder's efforts, but said they would not affect Hard's case.

"Alabama has created two classes of marriages within its borders and deemed one of those classes -- marriages between people of the same sex -- to be inferior to the other," Dinielli said. "This is unconstitutional. The only purpose of refusing Paul to have the proceeds from the wrongful death lawsuit is to punish him for having married a man, and to express moral disapproval of this choice. These purposes are improper and unconstitutional. Alabama must treat its LGBT citizens with equal dignity and respect under the law."

The Legislature passed the Marriage Protection Act in 1998 to ban recognition of same-sex marriages from other states. Alabama voters approved the Sanctity of Marriage constitutional amendment in 2005.

SPLC attorney Sam Wolfe said Fancher named Hard the sole beneficiary in his will.

"You'd think that would make David Paul's beneficiary in the wrongful death case," Wolfe said. "But Alabama's wrongful death law totally ignores wills, and only looks to family relations for distribution of wrongful death proceeds, including whether the decease has a surviving spouse."

Hard said he is a former Southern Baptist preacher who grew up in west Alabama. He said he and Fancher were together seven years before they got married on Marconi Beach in Massachusetts. He was asked what Fancher would have thought of his lawsuit.

"I think he would have told me to go for it," Hard said. "He was my biggest cheerleader. He was a big advocate for the rights of the community."

The bizarre tale of Dale Peterson – internet legend, convicted thief, candidate (Yellowhammer News)

The Alabama State Auditor performs an important but little known job for Alabama taxpayers. The Auditor's website says that the office "is responsible and accountable for all state personal property." In addition to that, "the office is charged to perform an audit of the equipment in each State Agency every two years."

According to Alabama's current State Auditor, Samantha Shaw, her goal since taking office in 2006 has been to keep "accurate records of all personal property valued at \$500 and above as well as items deemed sensitive in nature."

In short, the Alabama State Auditor oversees what the State of Alabama owns — items that have been purchased by the taxpayers.

Here are just a few examples of the property the Auditor's office is charged with keeping track of:

The State's computers

Computers

The State's fleet of vehicles

Trucks

The State's heavy equipment

Needless to say, the Auditor's job is one that must be performed by someone with impeccable character, someone the taxpayers can trust to be their watchdog and make sure the state's property is all accounted for.

Enter Dale Peterson, who qualified to run for State Auditor just before the deadline this past Friday, Feb. 7.

Peterson is the horse-ridin', gun-totin' Republican who became internet famous during his ill-fated 2010 campaign for Alabama Agriculture Commissioner. Early on in the race, one of his campaign videos went viral on YouTube. In the video, Peterson warned of "thugs and criminals" who "don't give a rip about Alabama," and called out his opponents for "stealing yard signs in the dead of night."

Flash forward a couple of years to Oct. 15, 2012. At 4:45 p.m. that day, in an ironic twist, Peterson was arrested at a Wal-Mart in Hoover, Ala. for stealing two cases of beer and a pack of paper towels.

According to documents filed in Hoover Municipal Court, a Wal-Mart employee "observed Roger Dale Peterson Select the beer and paper towels and place both items in his cart. Peterson then passed all points of purchase and made no attempt to pay for the merchandise in his cart. Peterson was apprehended and the merchandise was recovered."

Peterson was charged with Theft of Property in the Third Degree, a Class A misdemeanor.

Flash forward again to March 27, 2013. Peterson was arrested once more, this time for stealing a container of cashews from Sam's Club in Hoover, Ala.

According to documents filed in Hoover Municipal Court, a Sam's club employee "observed Rodger Peterson select the above merchandise. Mr. Peterson then opened the merchandise and started eating the cashews. Mr. Peterson continued to walk around Sam's club eating the cashews. Mr. Peterson then placed the merchandise back on the shelf. Mr. Peterson then proceeded to the register where he purchased other items but failed to pay for the merchandise he ate. Mr. Peterson then exited the store where he was approached by Mr. Heaton. Mr. Peterson made a verbal statement to Mr. Heaton that he messed up and should have paid for the cashews."

Peterson was once again charged with Theft of Property in the Third Degree.

But the second time was a little different. Yellowhammer was the first to break the news of Peterson's arrest, sending him into a bizarre Twitter tirade of conspiracy theories that seemed to include the suggestion that we somehow set him up.

Flash forward one final time to Nov. 20, 2013. Rodger Dale Peterson was convicted in Hoover municipal court of Theft in the Third Degree in both of the cases outlined above. The judge ordered Peterson to pay a fine of \$1,000 for each conviction, as well as court costs and restitution of \$48.50 to Wal-Mart (the cost of the beer) and \$13.48 to Sam's Club (the cost of the cashews). Each conviction also carried a sentence of 180 days in jail.

On Dec. 3, 2013, Peterson gave notice to the court that he was appealing the ruling. He is currently set for a jury trial on May 5, 2014.

So to summarize, Dale Peterson, a convicted thief, is currently running for the office of State Auditor, whose sole job is to keep track of what the state owns; and his appeal is scheduled to be heard by a jury almost exactly one month before primary election day.

[MSNBC commentator and Alabama grad Joe Scarborough isn't ruling out 2016 presidential bid \(al.com\)](#)

MSNBC's Joe Scarborough said he's open to making a run for the presidency in 2016.

Scarborough, an Atlanta native and 1985 graduate of the University of Alabama, said he "won't rule out" making a bid for the office, adding "we'll see what happens."

"I've always said and I've always been open about the fact that the greatest job I ever had and the greatest honor I've ever had was being in the House of Representatives," the former Florida congressman said. "It was an absolute thrill and I had to get out because I had young children to raise and I wanted to be back home in Pensacola. No, I've always said I wanted to get back in. It's just a matter of time. We'll see what happens," Scarborough said in a Politico report.

This isn't the first time Scarborough's name has come up in connection with the country's top job. In 2012, his name came up as a possible presidential contender but he backed away from the idea and, at the time, denied he would seek the office in 2016.

Scarborough, a Republican, represented Florida's 1st district in Congress from 1995-2001.

[Congress reverses cuts to military pensions: Sen. Jeff Sessions says it 'was right thing to do' \(al.com\)](#)

The U.S. Senate overwhelmingly voted Wednesday to repeal pension cuts for military retirees, a move Alabama Sen. Jeff Sessions describes as "the right thing to do" for millions of veterans.

The Senate voted 95-3 to repeal the 1 percent reduction in the annual cost-of-living adjustments, or COLAS, set to hit working-age military retirees at the end of 2015. The cuts were part of the two-year budget agreement crafted in December in an effort to avoid another government shutdown.

The cuts have been blasted by lawmakers and veterans groups since they were announced. On Tuesday, the House voted 326-90 to repeal the cuts, with support from all members of Alabama's Congressional delegation.

Sessions, R-AL, ranking member of the Senate Budget Committee, said the inclusion of the cuts to pensions for military veterans younger than 62 was one of the reasons he voted against the December budget agreement, which he said "unfairly and disproportionately" targeted service members, retirees and veterans.

"After exposing how deep these cuts were - and the impact on disabled veterans - I pushed to have them reversed," Sessions said. "Fixing this is the right thing to do for our veterans."

The pension cuts would save about \$6 billion over the next 10 years. To offset that, Sessions and other Republicans were pushing for an amendment to close a tax credit loophole used by illegal immigrants. That measure wasn't included in the bill, with the Senate opting to stick with the House plan to offset the costs by extending sequestration cuts to mandatory spending under Medicare for one year, through 2024 instead of 2023. That extension will create about \$2.3 billion in savings.

New military personnel will see retirement cuts

The bill does away with the COLA reductions for veterans and currently service troops. It will be in place, however, for anyone who enlists or receives a commission as of Jan. 1, 2014 if they serve long enough to qualify for retirement benefits.

That inclusion drew comments from the Veterans of Foreign Wars, which had lobbied hard for the cuts to be repealed.

"The world will remain a very dangerous and unpredictable place even after America ends its involvement in Afghanistan, and future military retirees will be required to serve just as long and perhaps sacrifice even more than their predecessors, said VFW Commander in Chief William Thien. "It is in that regard that the VFW will continue to fight for a full repeal of the COLA penalty, and we hope that this vote will continue that conversation."

The bill now goes to President Barack Obama for his signature.

For his part, Sessions said he will continue the fight to close the tax loophole that costs the U.S. billions each year.

"I will continue working to end the improper payment of billions in tax credits to illegal immigrants - for the sake of all U.S. taxpayers," he said.

Alabama attorney new TVA chairman (TimesDaily)

The Tennessee Valley Authority board of directors selected Alabama attorney Joe Ritch to serve as its next chairman.

Ritch, who is scheduled to visit the Shoals next week, was elected Thursday at the board's meeting in Chattanooga.

When Ritch takes over, he will be the first Alabamian to serve as TVA board chairman. He is only the second Alabamian on TVA's board, following Huntsville's Howard Thraikill.

"It's premature to say much about it right now since it just happened," Ritch told the Times Daily on Thursday. "I'm still learning, and I'm sure by May I'll have a lot better idea of what the position will mean.

"Since we represent the whole area that TVA serves, it's not that important where I come from. But being from Alabama calls a certain amount of attention to it. We have an outstanding board and outstanding management."

Ritch is scheduled to visit the Shoals next Friday along with TVA President and CEO Bill Johnson at a Shoals Chamber of Commerce breakfast meeting.

Ritch replaces Bill Sansom, of Knoxville, whose term ends May 18.

According to TVA, Ritch is an attorney at Sirote & Permutt in Huntsville, where he has worked since 1982. Ritch also serves as chairman of the Tennessee Valley Base Realignment and Closures Committee.

He is co-chairman of the Tennessee Valley Growth Coordination Group and serves on several other boards.

Alabama Sen. Jeff Sessions, R-Mobile, praised the selection of Ritch as chairman.

“For the first time in TVA’s history, a citizen of Alabama will serve as the chairman of the TVA board,” Sessions said in a statement. “This is an exciting day for our state. Joe knows our region and has the leadership skills to be a very fine chairman. He will face many challenges as he leads the board.

“Many key TVA decisions will be made in the years to come. I know that I am joined by other community leaders in north Alabama in congratulating Joe on this important assignment and look forward to working with him.”