



Office of Senate President Pro Tempore Del Marsh
Press Clips
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[Remington plant, 2,000 jobs in Huntsville will grow advanced manufacturing base in north Alabama \(al.com\)](#)

Community leaders began packing the auditorium of the Chamber of Commerce of Huntsville/Madison County this afternoon to hear the news that Remington Outdoor Co. will expand with a new manufacturing facility in the Rocket City.

The plant, which will create 2,000 jobs over the next decade and reflect a statewide investment of \$110 million, will be located in the old Chrysler building near Huntsville International Airport. Operations are expected to begin in the next 18 months after the facility is upgraded.

The production and advanced manufacturing positions will pay between \$40,000 and \$50,000 before benefits, according to Huntsville Mayor Tommy Battle.

"We've always been known for engineering and research and development," he said. "We have a huge advanced manufacturing base that's really just not recognized, not touted a lot. This gives us a chance to start talking about our advanced manufacturing base and also, it addresses the need for jobs for those who want to go into the technical career fields."

At full employment, the new Remington plant will be the third-largest private employer in Madison County. Twenty-four states made proposals to Remington, which is the country's oldest firearms manufacturer.

Chip Cherry, chief executive officer of the Chamber of Commerce of Huntsville/Madison County, said the Remington facility will be a "great opportunity" for workers in the advanced manufacturing fields.

"Not everybody wants to be an engineer or be in a technical field," he said. "We think this is a great opportunity to grow that segment of the economy with a company that has a very rich history and makes a very good quality product."

Robert Mays, president of BlueCreek Investment Partners and new chairman of the Chamber of Commerce of Huntsville/Madison County, said the Remington plant "will lead to new opportunities" across Huntsville and north Alabama.

"It will add to the great corporate ecosystem we already have here in place," he said during the news conference. "We know this announcement is really just the beginning of a very long and productive partnership we're going to have with you and your company."

Remington, which looked at other sites in Alabama, has 19 locations in the U.S. The company grew from 2,400 employees in 2008 to 4,200 workers in late 2013.

"Our pro-business environment, along with the region's extensive manufacturing experience, helped us outmaneuver two dozen other states looking to attract Remington," Madison County Commission Chairman Dale Strong said in a statement. "This announcement represents new diversity to our local economy, and will provide an array of opportunities for skilled tradesmen, engineers and support personnel."

Rep. Mo Brooks, R-Huntsville, said Remington's decision to locate in Huntsville is timely as International Paper in Courtland prepares to shutter operations in March. Approximately 1,100 workers at the Lawrence County plant will be affected.

"Our partnership with Remington reinforces the Tennessee Valley's reputation for both our pro-growth policies and for being a great family-friendly place to live and work. No question, it helps that we believe in the Second Amendment Right to Bear Arms. It also helps that we don't believe in class-warfare and envy, rather, we believe in applauding success that is hard-earned, as Remington's has been."

[Alabama's incentive package for Remington gun plant: \\$38M cash, tax breaks, extensive workforce recruitment and training \(al.com\)](#)

Alabama Commerce Secretary Greg Canfield said Remington Arms intends to spend about \$110 million turning the vacant former Chrysler electronics plant near Huntsville International Airport into a state-of-the-art firearms production facility that could open in early 2015.

Here's a quick look at what incentives the state, the cities of Huntsville and Athens, plus Madison, Limestone and Morgan counties have agreed to kick in to land the more than 2,000 jobs associated with Remington's first gun plant in the Southeastern U.S.

The total investment by state and local governments is \$68.9 million:

Alabama: According to a news release, the state will provide \$38.3 million to assist Remington in retrofitting and equipping the 843,000-square-foot former Chrysler plant at the corner of Wall-Triana Highway and Electronics Boulevard. In addition, the state has pledged to help Remington recruit and train workers for the Huntsville plant over a 10-year period -- an incentive valued at \$15.9M.

"It's a long-term commitment as the project takes shape," Canfield told AL.com following a Monday news conference at the Huntsville-Madison County Chamber of Commerce.

Also, Remington will receive tax abatements on the non-education share of state and local property and use taxes for 10 years. "Education is going to win from this," said Canfield.

He said the state in the coming days will begin scouting for space in Huntsville to open a Remington workforce recruitment and training center. Remington should be operational here in about a year, said Canfield, ramping up to "full employment" within six years.

The state says it will also provide \$150,000 worth of site preparation work at the future Remington plant.

Huntsville and Madison County: The two governments are teaming up to buy the former Chrysler plant for \$10.5 million and provide Remington another \$2 million for equipment. Mayor Tommy Battle said Remington will use the factory rent-free for 10 years as long as it meets employment targets included in a development agreement approved Monday afternoon by the City Council.

The city will transfer \$9.5 million from its capital fund to cover its share of the incentive package; Madison County commissioners are holding a work session Tuesday to consider a plan to provide \$3 million.

Commission Chairman Dale Strong said the county's proposed investment would pay for itself "hundreds of times over" in the form of 2,000 advanced manufacturing jobs, new home sales and other spinoff growth from bringing "the world's finest firearms company" to the Rocket City.

"People were wanting more to be done on economic development," said Strong. "I believe we've answered that call. Truly, this is going to be the shot heard round the world."

Athens and Limestone County: The City of Athens, Limestone County Commission and Limestone Economic Development Association are contributing a total of \$1 million to the Remington incentive package. The Remington plant will be located just a mile or so east of the Limestone County line.

"It will greatly benefit Limestone County with the creation of new jobs," said County Commission Chairman Stanley Menefee.

Battle said Huntsville's Industrial Development Board will pay Remington \$500,000 each time the company hits a key employment milestone. The four installments totaling \$2 million are due when Remington reaches 250, 500, 750 and 1,000 jobs in Huntsville.

Money for that employment bonus is coming from Limestone and Morgan counties and the City of Athens, said Battle.

Fighting poverty? GOP sticks with pro-business, school choice, lean government theme (al.com)

MONTGOMERY, Alabama --- The Republican-led Alabama Legislature's answer to poverty and other long-term problems is to promote business, lean government and school choice, GOP leaders say.

But as the 2014 legislative session hits the halfway point Tuesday, some say that's not doing much to help a poor state where about one in five depend on food stamps.

House Speaker Mike Hubbard, R-Auburn and Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh, R-Anniston, say they are sticking with the theme set when Republicans captured the State House in 2010.

"Making more jobs available for people, that's the way you get out of poverty," Hubbard said.

Republicans oppose what would bring the most immediate help, expanding Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act.

Democratic Sen. Roger Bedford of Russellville said Republicans "should be ashamed." Bedford said expansion would help more people get preventive care, stay healthy enough to work and avoid costly emergency room care.

"So if you really want to do away with poverty or minimize its impact in Alabama, you've got to have a health care system that covers working Alabamians who are making the minimum wage or slightly over it," Bedford said.

Bedford is sponsor of a bill calling for Alabama to expand Medicaid, but it has not moved.

Gov. Robert Bentley began the legislative session a few weeks ago with a speech saying that expanding the private sector, not Medicaid, is the way out of poverty.

"The only thing that we're doing, not only as a Legislature but me as governor is to try to continue every day to create jobs in the state," the governor said Saturday.

What exactly is being done? The Republican leadership is moving a number of business-friendly bills this session. The bills would:

--- Help start-up businesses raise capital through crowdfunding.

--- Change the law so that fewer businesses will have to make estimated sales tax payments in advance, rather than paying the amount that actually comes in.

--- Set up an independent board to hear taxpayer disputes instead of a division within the Department of Revenue.

--- Set up a council of business leaders to advise colleges and schools on workforce needs.

Other GOP bills address education. They would help high school students take dual enrollment technical courses at community colleges, protect private schools from state regulation and protect local school boards from unfunded mandates.

'Can't afford what we have now'

As for Medicaid, Republican leaders say it would be irresponsible to expand a program that already consumes more than one-third of the General Fund. The federal government would pay for expansion the first three years under Obamacare, but the state would eventually have to pay 10 percent.

"The easy thing would be, 'OK, let's expand Medicaid and take all this money and add 300,000 people to the rolls,'" Hubbard said. "Then when we have to come up with our 10 percent match, we've got no way to do it. We can't afford what we have right now."

Kimble Forrister, executive director of Alabama Arise, which advocates for low-income families, said expansion would not only help the working poor but also pump new life into the economy. Forrister cited a UAB study that found the new economic activity generated by the infusion of federal dollars would more than offset Alabama's cost of expanding Medicaid through 2020.

"Their assumptions were extremely conservative," Forrister said "They showed the new revenue would exceed the cost by \$900 million."

Democratic Rep. Craig Ford of Gadsden, the House minority leader, says Republicans oppose Medicaid expansion for political reasons during an election year. He said it shouldn't matter that expansion is tied to President Obama's signature law.

"We're leaving people's taxpaying dollars back in Washington when it should be coming back here to Alabama," Ford said.

Last year, the Legislature approved a system of managed care groups to run Medicaid services. That change is still in the works. The goal is to slow the growth in costs and improve care.

"It's going to be at least another year before we know the effect of that and if the savings are there that they claim are going to be there," Marsh said.

Payday loan rates a perennial issue

Even with Medicaid expansion at a stalemate, Alabama Arise's Forrister says the Legislature could still help the poor by finally addressing other perennial issues, such as tighter regulation of consumer lending. Democratic lawmakers are sponsoring bills in the House to reduce the triple-digit annual interest rates charged on payday loans and car title loans. Similar legislation has failed in recent years and the bills stalled in a House committee last week.

Forrister said the issue is critical as more families have turned to the costly loans after the recession reduced incomes for many.

"They are squeezing the few assets a drowning family has out of them," Forrister said.

Some Republicans support efforts to tighten regulations on lenders. Marsh proposed a bill last year and Sen. Scott Beason, R-Gardendale, plans to try this year.

Bentley supports cutting rates on the loans.

"I know the loan institutions have to make a living," the governor said. "But these are exorbitant rates, and people who are the most disadvantaged are the ones who are having to borrow this, and we just need to help some of these people who get into difficulties."

Hubbard said the Alabama Accountability Act, passed last year, is a weapon in the long-term war against poverty because it gives families more school choice. The bill provides tax credits to help pay private school tuitions and help children transfer from failing schools.

Critics of the law say it doesn't help much in poor areas with few private schools. Hubbard said the \$25 million annual scholarship program that is also part of the new law will change that.

"That is going to be a game-changer and we will see more opportunities open up for these kids," he said. "Before this, there was really no reason to have a school because there was no access. The parents were not in a financial situation to even send their kids to a school. This thing is going to take a little while to work, but it is already working and it will continue to work."

Republicans say a bill to set up a \$10 million scholarship program for high school students to take job training classes at community colleges will cut the dropout rate.

"It's a proven fact that dual enrollment, where you can find a kid's interest and what they want to do from a career standpoint, you get them in that early, they understand a reason to stay in school," Hubbard said.

Bedford and Ford both support the dual enrollment bill.

"There's great demand out there for skilled electricians, plumbers, bricklayers, that type of things," Bedford said. "Those are jobs that have meaning and value."

The scholarships will be funded by donations. Taxpayers and businesses will get a tax credit equal to 50 percent of their donations, up to a statewide cap of \$5 million, which will come from the Education Trust Fund.

Ford said there were better ways to fund the scholarships than taking money from the ETF. He suggested eliminating a liability insurance program for educators created by the Legislature last year. Ford said the insurance was not needed and Republicans passed it purely to take a swipe at the AEA, which provides insurance for members.

No movement on lottery

Senate Minority Leader Vivian Figures, D-Mobile, said she would like to see more done to directly help families escape poverty, such as more help with child care for the working poor. Figures said numbers don't support Republican claims of success about creating jobs. The unemployment rate has declined, but the state's labor force also shrank in 2013.

"They're not doing anything directly policy-wise," Figures said. "They say they're bringing in jobs, but the statistics show Alabama has lost jobs."

Figures said she would like to see a state vote on a lottery. Ford has proposed a constitutional amendment to set up a lottery to support college scholarships for A/B students and the hiring of school police officers. But the bill has not moved.

The Legislature still has to pass both state budgets this year. The General Fund budget will be heard in committee this week. It is expected to call for level funding for most state agencies.

For several years, Republicans have moved to cut government overhead, including last year's bills to consolidate law enforcement and information technology. Marsh says that could eventually save enough to put 100 more state troopers on the road save tens of millions on IT services.

Many state agencies have fewer employees because of attrition.

"All these agencies have been cut, some of them as much as 40 percent, and yet when I go home, I'm not having my constituents come to me and say, 'Del, we're not getting our services. We're not getting the things we used to get from state government,' " Marsh said. "I believe that they were fat and we have worked to right-size them."

House Minority Leader Ford said he does hear from teachers and state employees who are concerned about the results of funding cuts.

"I hear from classroom teachers on a daily basis saying that they're teaching over 20 students in each classroom and how they have less money for public education in their classroom where the rubber meets the road," Ford said.

[This week in the Legislature: General Fund may make appearance \(Montgomery Advertiser\)](#)

A look ahead at the week in the Legislature. All events subject to change.

House of Representatives

The House is scheduled to return at 1 p.m. Tuesday.

In committee:

- The House Health Committee meets at 9 a.m. Wednesday and is scheduled to discuss two abortion-related bills, one that would put limits on abortions performed on minors 18 and younger, and one that would require a pregnant woman seeking termination because of a fetal lethal abnormality to seek information about the availability of hospice for the infant.
- The House Judiciary Committee meets at noon Wednesday, and is scheduled to discuss a bill that would keep the identities of those involved in state executions of inmates sentenced to capital punishment confidential. It may also discuss a bill that would address the rights of grandparents in certain situations.
- The Education Policy Committee meets at 3 p.m. Wednesday, and is scheduled to discuss and vote on two bills related to religion in schools.
- The House Ways and Means General Fund Committee meets at 1:30 p.m. Wednesday, and is scheduled to take up the proposed General Fund budget for fiscal year 2015.

Senate

The Senate is scheduled to return at 1 p.m. Tuesday. Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh's office said they planned to take up legislation known as the Taxpayer's Bill of Rights on Tuesday.

In committee:

- The Senate's Finance and Taxation Education Committee meets at 10:30 a.m. Wednesday, and is scheduled to take up legislation from Sen. Gerald Dial, R-Lineville, that would phase out the state's sales tax on groceries by 2017. The bill would raise the general state sales tax rate to five percent during that time.
- The Senate Judiciary Committee meets at 1 p.m. Wednesday, and is scheduled to take up a bill from Rep. Bill Poole, R-Tuscaloosa, that would allow warrantless arrests for those trespassing on school property.
- The Senate's Constitution and Elections Committee meets at 2:30 p.m. Wednesday, and is scheduled to hold hearings on changes to the Alabama Constitution as proposed by the Constitution Revision Commission.

State officials hoping Internet sales tax will provide state windfall. But will it be enough? (Anniston Star)

by Tim Lockette

MONTGOMERY -- If Robert Robicheaux is right, Alabamians may be clicking their state into the poorhouse.

Much of the time, when people buy products online, they're buying from a company that isn't paying Alabama any sales tax, Robicheaux said. And they're taking money away from local businesses that do.

"People will go into a camera shop, look at the merchandise, and ask all sorts of expert questions," said Robicheaux, a professor at the University of Alabama at Birmingham's Collat School of Business. "And then they say, thanks, I'll go buy it online."

Robicheaux estimates that the state is losing around \$200 million per year in sales taxes to e-commerce. He's also an advocate for collecting that tax.

Lately, the mood in Montgomery has been swinging Robicheaux's way. Despite Alabama's reputation as an anti-tax state, leaders in the state capitol are sounding increasingly hopeful that Congress will pass the Marketplace Fairness Act, a bill that would allow states to tax online purchases from out-of-state companies such as Amazon.

The Alabama Legislature has already passed a bill to shunt most of the new tax money to the state's troubled General Fund -- assuming, of course, that Alabama gets to collect the tax. Gov. Robert Bentley has told the Associated Press that an online sales tax windfall, if it came, could pay for state employee pay raises he has proposed. And leaders in the Legislature increasingly mention the Marketplace Fairness Act first, when asked how to fix the state's budget woes.

"That could be something that would be very helpful to the General Fund," said House Speaker Mike Hubbard, R-Auburn, of the potential new tax revenue.

Tax myth

"The idea that you don't owe sales tax when you buy things online is a myth that has been around a long time," said William Fox, a University of Tennessee professor who studies online sales taxes.

States are allowed to charge sales tax to any online seller that has a physical presence in the state. That means you're likely paying sales tax when you order online from Walmart or similar retailers, even if that tax is folded in with shipping and other charges.

"If the site asks for your ZIP code, it's probably so they can calculate the tax," said UAB's Robicheaux.

For businesses that don't have a physical store or warehouse in-state, there's a similar tax called the consumer use tax. That tax has been around since the days of mail-order catalogs, but for the past 20 years, states have had a hard time collecting it. A 1992 Supreme Court ruling banned states from collecting consumer use tax from out-of-state sellers.

Technically, online shoppers are supposed to report and pay their consumer use tax on their state income tax returns. Almost no one does that. According to figures from the Alabama Department of Revenue, about half of businesses report consumer use tax when they buy from out of state businesses -- and only 1 percent of consumers do.

"There's a reason we collect income tax through the employer," Fox said. "It's easier to enforce when you have fewer entities to deal with."

The Marketplace Fairness Act would change the landscape, allowing the states to collect the money directly from the sellers, potentially giving states a huge boost in tax revenues.

Filling a hole

If lawmakers in Alabama seem unusually eager to collect that tax, they may have a good reason. There will soon be a big hole in the one of the state's budgets.

Most state functions are paid for through the General Fund, which draws its money from a hodgepodge of taxes and fees. Sales and income taxes, which grow and shrink with the economy, go into a separate budget just for schools.

The General Fund has become the state's problem child. Prison populations and Medicaid enrollment have grown significantly in recent years, but the \$1.8 billion General Fund doesn't grow as fast. Two years ago, the state's voters agreed to raid a state trust fund for \$437 million to shore up the fund for three years.

That money will run out in the 2016 fiscal year, which starts next October. That gives the state about a year and a half to fill a hole of around \$150 million.

The state has already passed a law that would direct 75 percent of new revenue from online sales to the General Fund if the Marketplace Fairness Act passes.

That's a big "if." The act passed the U.S. Senate last year, according to the Associated Press, and has the support of President Barack Obama. It needs approval in the House before it can become law.

For some of the state's budget leaders, though, the bill's passage is tantalizingly close. The Marketplace Fairness Act is the first thing some lawmakers mention when asked how the state will deal with the 2016 budget hole.

"We're still keeping our fingers crossed that Internet sales tax will get through Congress," said Rep. Steve Clouse, R-Ozark, chairman of the state House committee that oversees the General Fund budget.

Clouse said he expected an Internet sales tax to bring in somewhere between \$125 million and \$150 million.

Unclear projections

Two years ago Robicheaux projected the state would lose between \$176 million and \$216 million in taxes to Internet sales in 2014. Today, thanks to the growth of e-commerce, he says the real numbers may exceed those projections. But there's no guarantee that the Marketplace Fairness Act would bring all that money back to state governments.

Robicheaux said states would likely split some of the proceeds from the Marketplace Fairness Act with cities and counties, which are also losing tax money to the Internet. To keep online businesses from having to figure tax rates for every city, an Internet tax system would likely set up a single tax rate for each state, and would let the states work out formulas for dividing the money.

"If you order something in Montgomery, you might pay 8 percent, and the state and local governments would each take some of the money," Robicheaux said. Sales tax at brick-and-mortar retailers in Montgomery is 10 percent, including 4 percent statewide sales tax.

Fox, the University of Tennessee Internet tax expert, said collections under the Marketplace Fairness Act could fall significantly short of the amount of money the state is losing now.

In its current version, he said, the bill would exempt small retailers with revenues of less than \$1 million each. Many large retailers, he said, are already paying sales tax because they have a physical presence in every state.

"We think this legislation applies to at most about 2,000 firms," Fox said.

The \$1 million lower limit could help the bill get past critics who say that collecting consumer use tax would primarily be a burden on small businesses that rely on distant online sales to boost their business.

Cameron Smith, of the conservative Alabama Policy Institute, has been among those critics.

Smith said state officials are willing to support the tax because it's a charge on out-of-state entities, not folks at home. He said supporters of the tax are not thinking about the other side of the issue -- web-based businesses here in Alabama, that could be paying more taxes to other states. While Alabama may not have as many large online retailers as other states, he said, that's no reason to add a burden on the ones that exist.

"You could say that Alabama doesn't have as many online businesses," he said. "But why wouldn't we want more?"

Other plans

Sen. Arthur Orr, R-Decatur, was an early advocate of shifting potential Internet sales tax to the General Fund, but he's not counting on the tax to rescue the General Fund.

"I can't plan on that type of event happening," said Orr, chair of the Senate committee that oversees the General Fund.

Orr said he has come up with roughly half a dozen plans to deal with the projected 2016 shortfall, and has sent them to the Legislature's fiscal office for review.

"They're going to have a busy summer," he said.

Orr wouldn't discuss his plans in detail, but said some would involve consolidation of agencies.

Clouse, the House General Fund chairman, doesn't see how agencies can be cut more than they are.

He said lawmakers might consider eliminating some tax exemptions to raise more revenue if there's no other solution.

"We're past the bone now," he said.

[Corrections funding still uncertain as General Fund nears consideration \(al.com\)](#)

The state's General Fund budget is poised to begin its march through the legislative chambers, and lawmakers say it will likely resemble Gov. Robert Bentley's proposal from January.

That means level funding for most state agencies, enough money to keep Medicaid going another year, and a likely absence of cost-of-living increases for state employees.

However, the final number for the Alabama Department of Corrections was, as of last week, uncertain, and the General Fund budget chairs said a figure may not be determined until the budget moves to the Senate later in the session.

House Ways and Means General Fund committee chairman Steve Clouse, R-Ozark, said last week he expects the General Fund to be in his committee Wednesday, with a full vote in the House possible the following week.

The General Fund provides money for most non-education programs in the state, including the Alabama Medicaid Agency and the Department of Corrections. The budget is projected to stand at \$1.7 billion in the current fiscal year, which ends Sept. 30.

The budget gets most of its revenue from three dozen revenue sources, all of which post relatively flat growth year-to-year. With rapid growth in the cost of Medicaid and Corrections each year — and no appetite from majority Republicans for new revenues — lawmakers have repeatedly struggled to make ends meet in the budget.

Bentley's proposal, submitted to the Legislature on Jan. 15, calls for a \$1.8 billion General Fund for fiscal year 2015, which begins on Oct. 1. The governor's budget would effectively level-fund most state agencies. Medicaid, which makes up more than 35 percent of the General Fund, would see its budget increased to \$685 million, an increase of \$70 million.

Medicaid officials had sought a total budget of \$700 million for the program, which covers almost 20 percent of Alabama's population and pays for more than half of the births in state. Dr. Don Williamson, overseeing efforts to overhaul the program, said Friday the program could make it by on \$685 million.

"It means we will slide into the end of fiscal year 2015 flat broke," he said. "(But) I'm just not seeing, based on our spending patterns, that I can have any confidence making anything less than \$685 million work."

Clouse said Medicaid was "holding firm" to the requested \$70 million increase. Cuts to Medicaid impact the matching dollars the federal government provides the program; over two-thirds of Alabama's Medicaid bill is picked up by Washington.

"That's the cornerstone, that we get that two-to-one match," Clouse said.

Uncertainty about Corrections

Less certain is the budget number for Corrections. Bentley's budget called for \$389 million for the department, essentially level-funding it. Officials in the past have said that rising fixed costs in the prison system, which has faced overcrowding and understaffing issues for years, make modest increases necessary for officials to keep the department above water.

The system has also been battered by revelations of sexual abuse and harassment of inmates at Julia Tutwiler Prison for Women in Wetumpka. Last January, the U.S. Department of Justice wrote that Alabama was violating Tutwiler inmates' Eighth Amendment protection against cruel and unusual punishment "by failing to protect women prisoners at Tutwiler from harm due to sexual abuse and harassment from correctional staff."

The department received a funding boost last year, in part to fund security improvements aimed at curbing the abuse. But the ongoing investigations into the system — allegations of physical or sexual abuse have also been leveled at three men's prisons — have led some state officials to speculate that without action by state officials, the DOC could fall into federal receivership, as it did between 1976 and 1989.

Senate Finance and Taxation General Fund chair Arthur Orr, R-Decatur, said last month he hoped to find more money for the Department, which had requested a \$42 million increase to hire additional correctional officers, to make security improvements at three maximum-security facilities and to give merit raises to the staff.

"It's hard to pick priorities because we have so many pressing issues," Corrections commissioner Kim Thomas said Thursday.

Orr said Thursday that budget chairs were "still trying to determine the overall need for Corrections."

This year, the department sought \$4 million for corrections improvements at three maximum security prisons, up to and including improved locks, a foundational element of correctional facilities. Thomas also said that there was "obviously a need" to provide greater pay and incentives to correctional officers, whose starting salaries are about \$7,000 less than comparable law enforcement positions.

The commissioner said he had "no inside information" on what his budget might look like. Clouse said one of the major issues was determining where and how extra funding for Corrections would come from, and that question may not be settled for some time.

"We may not address that in the House side of the budget," he said. "We'll keep talking, see how revenues are coming in and see where we go from there, and maybe it's something that's dealt with in the Senate, or in conference committee."

Asked if Corrections would get Bentley's revenue projection, Clouse said "they won't be getting less."

Lawmaker suggests Common Core 'moratorium' (TimesDaily)

The Alabama senator who said he would bring a bill to repeal the use of Common Core standards in the state is trying to size up the amount of support his legislation might have among colleagues.

Sen. Scott Beason, R-Gardendale, had originally proposed a complete repeal of the national education standards already in use or being implemented here.

Now, he's looking of more of a "moratorium model" that would temporarily halt the use of the standards, which Beason has called "unproven curriculum."

He said last week that leaving what has already been done with the standards on the table, but halting further implementation or possibly letting schools revert to the pre-Common Core standards has a better chance of passing the Legislature than a complete repeal.

"There seems to be more stomach for that," Beason said.

Common Core is part of the Alabama College and Career Ready Standards adopted by the state school board. The idea is to have students in Alabama learning the same concepts as children in their same grade in other states.

The issue has split Republicans. Some say Common Core improves the state's education system; others call it federal intrusion.

Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh, R-Anniston, has said the Senate won't deal with Common Core this year. It's a school board issue, he has said. And, legislative leadership is trying to avoid controversial issues in this election-year session.

Marsh has a Republican challenger in the June primary. Steven Guede is running largely on an anti-Common Core platform, The Anniston Star reported last week.

Legislation approved

In other education-related legislation, a bill to create an Alabama Workforce Council received final approval last week.

According to House Bill 345 and Senate Bill 217, the council would be an appointed group of state business and industry managers that advises the state's community college and K-12 systems, and will serve as an advisory body in formulating policies and workforce programming.

The bill was sponsored by Sen. Paul Bussman, R-Cullman, and Rep. Terri Collins, R-Decatur.

Board members would be appointed by the governor, lieutenant governor, speaker of the House and Senate president pro tem. The governor would also appoint a member from each of 10 regions of the state. Collins described it as a way to align education and workforce needs.

Supplying a steady stream of skilled workers to existing business — and those they want to attract — has become a major talking point among Republican leaders.

Last week the House also passed a dual enrollment tax credit bill that will help more high school students take career tech classes at local community colleges.

The bill includes a tax credit for business and individuals who sponsor scholarships. Those tax credits could cost the state's education budget up to \$5 million a year.

Payday legislation gets second wind (TimesDaily)

MONTGOMERY — Local communities and advocacy groups that are looking to the state Legislature for more stringent regulations on payday lending brokers may have reason for hope this session.

A regulatory bill stalled in a House committee last week, but now two senators are considering their own bills.

Sen. Arthur Orr, R-Decatur, said he was going to study during the weekend what other states have done and what could be applied here.

“In general, we need to make changes to the existing law,” Orr said. “I’m interested in seeing something advance this year.”

Though advocates for regulation speak of annual interest rates of more than 400 percent and said the loans are designed to trap people who can least afford them, bills to restrict payday lenders have had little success in previous legislative sessions.

Rep. Todd’s bill

The bill that was derailed last week was from Rep. Patricia Todd, D-Birmingham.

It would require that payday lenders be licensed by the state banking department, limit the interest rates paid on loans to 36 percent and limit loans to no more than six in a 12-month period. Todd’s bill also would require lenders to offer installment plans for repayment and forbid lenders from going to people’s homes to collect money.

Orr said he wants to talk to Todd about where the major pushback to her bill originates.

Max Wood, president of Borrow Smart, a payday industry group, did not return calls late last week. He has previously said legislation such as Todd’s would shut down the businesses designed for short-term loaning.

Jay McDuffie, owner of the Check Depot chain in Birmingham, said at a public hearing last week there are more expensive alternatives than payday loans, such as bank overdraft fees or utility re-connection fees.

But at least one other senator thinks the loans can be immoral.

"I don't know where the line between regular interest rates ends and usury begins, but I know we're way over that," said Sen. Scott Beason, R-Gardendale.

He said his bill would combine some of Todd's with another house bill to restrict the interest on car title loans.

Beason said he is pro-business, and a free market has its place, "But in a society, there has to be rules and boundaries, and I think usury is one of those things that is wrong."

Community concerns

Muscle Shoals is among the Alabama cities that has debated regulating the payday loan industry. Mayor David Bradford said the city is studying where the lenders are locating and possible zoning changes.

"They all seem to be grouped into one area," Bradford said. "We're trying to look at some ways we can regulate them in terms of density and where they are. We were hoping the state could look at some regulations as well."

If the state regulates banks, it should regulate loan companies, he said.

"Some operate almost like a pawn shop where they end up with someone's car," Bradford said. "We do realize it's a business transaction, but you worry about citizens having transportation and being able to afford things."

Meanwhile, Bradford described the taxes that payday lenders contribute to city coffers as "minimal."

Contribution concerns

In the House committee that voted to delay Todd's bill, a move she said essentially killed it, campaign finance records show that the lenders and a related political action committee had contributed to six of the nine committee members, the Associated Press reported last week.

The cumulative contributions ranged from \$1,000 to \$3,900 per lawmaker.

The contributions are legal, but Todd called them "disgusting" and a factor in last week's vote.

Committee member Rep. Marcel Black, D-Tuscumbia, said the \$1,000 he recently received from the company Title Max, or any other contribution he receives, doesn't have bearing on his votes.

"You can say that about any contribution, from Alabama Power to the Christian Coalition," he said. As long as contributions are legally made and reported, there's no wrongdoing.

Black has about \$102,000 in campaign contributions in the 2014 election cycle.

"I would hope that any contributions I receive, it's because they think I'm a good person for the job," Black said.

Black didn't participate in the voice vote on Todd's bill, he said, because "it was already over with."

But, he thinks the Legislature will have to vote one way or another on payday lenders.

"It deserves an up or down vote," he said. "At some point, we're going to have to deal with it. That bill is not going away."

[New Beason-sponsored gun bill would legalize pistols in cars without concealed carry permits \(al.com\)](#)

MONTGOMERY, Alabama -- State Sen. Scott Beason, R-Gardendale, wants to make it legal to carry a loaded handgun in your car without a concealed carry permit and has introduced a bill to relax the law.

Beason's proposed change to the law comes a year after the Alabama Legislature made major changes to the law for carrying weapons.

Under the current law, it is legal to carry a weapon in a vehicle without a permit if the weapon is unloaded and out of reach of anyone in the car.

"If you pull someone over for a real good reason, then you don't need to take them to jail for a gun crime."

"It's the same thing I started out with last year," Beason said in an interview Monday. "I don't think you should have to pay for your second amendment rights."

Beason said that it bothered him that law enforcement can charge a driver with a gun crime, even when there might not have been a cause for a search when a driver is pulled over.

"If you pull someone over for a real good reason, then you don't need to take them to jail for a gun crime," he said. "You've already got a good reason.0022

Bill could ban most abortions in state (al.com)

MONTGOMERY — Some local pro-life Republicans are backing a bill that would ban many abortions in Alabama.

House Bill 490 is the "Fetal Heartbeat Act," one of four abortion-related pieces of legislation that will have public hearings in the House Health Committee on Wednesday.

The bill will make it unlawful for a physician to perform an abortion if a heartbeat can be detected. Medical experts said that can happen as early as around eight weeks.

Current law allows for abortions at up to 20 weeks of pregnancy.

Bill sponsor Rep. Mary Sue McClurkin, R-Pelham, said she hopes to reduce the number of abortions in the state.

"This bill specifically deals with killing a person with a heartbeat," McClurkin said Monday. "We wouldn't kill a person in a hospital with a heartbeat; we just wouldn't.

"It is just simply a bill that will require abortionists to check for the heartbeat, let the mother hear the heartbeat, and then, if there is a heartbeat, he cannot do the abortion."

There are about 26 co-sponsors on McClurkin's bill, including Rep. Ed Henry, R-Hartselle, Rep. Terri Collins, R-Decatur, and Rep. Lynn Greer, R-Rogersville.

"I'm pro-life, and I think anything we can do reduce abortions, we need to do," Greer said Monday. He said he's not sure the legislation can pass.

"But at least we're making a statement," he said.

Collins said the goal of the bill, she's sure, is to decrease abortions.

"But it does have several exceptions for the life or the health of the mother," she said.

The bill would require the physician document the procedure used to determine a heartbeat. Not determining the presence of a heartbeat or performing an abortion when a heartbeat has been determined will be a Class C felony, according to the legislation, unless the abortion was medically necessary because the woman's life or health were at risk. The women would not be prosecuted under this legislation.

Similar bills have been introduced in a few other states in recent years. Opponents have said the bills essentially ban abortions.

McClurkin last year sponsored successful legislation to put more restrictions on abortion providers in the state. Proponents said the bill would make abortion safer; opponents said the legislation, which among other things required all abortion doctors to have admitting privileges at local hospitals, would simply shut them down.

That law is currently being contested in federal court.

48-hour wait

Henry has his own abortion-related legislation. House Bill 489 changes from 24 hours to 48 hours the required wait time between when a woman receives state-mandated information about an abortion and when the procedure can be performed.

Henry's bill changes the timing in the Woman's Right to Know Act, which requires abortion providers to give women information, including "agencies that offer assistance, adoption agencies, development of the unborn child, methods and risks of abortion and childbirth, father's obligations and alternatives to abortion."

Two years ago at an anti-abortion rally, Henry told the crowd that he regretted an abortion a former girlfriend had when he was younger.

"When we had ours, it was just drive and show up (and have the abortion)," he said. "I don't know if 48 hours would have made a difference, but I suspect it would have."

'Perinatal Hospice'

House Bill 493 from Rep. Kurt Wallace, R-Maplesville, is the "Perinatal Hospice Information Act." It's designed to encourage women not to abort fetuses that aren't likely to survive to birth or much longer afterward.

It would prohibit abortions based on a "lethal fetal anomaly" unless a woman has been made aware of available hospice services if she carries the fetus to term.

The bill defines lethal fetal anomaly as a condition diagnosed before birth that will likely result in the death of the unborn child within three months of birth.

Wallace said the more information women have about services available — including counseling and medical care that are available — the more likely they are not to abort.

But Wallace said there is nothing in his bill that prevents a woman from going ahead with an abortion. "She has to get the information, what she does with it is up to her," he said.

If it became law, a violation of the act by an abortion provider would be a Class B misdemeanor. Patients would not be prosecuted.

The fourth bill, House Bill 494, changes the consent laws and process for minors seeking abortions. All four abortion-related bills will have public hearings in the House Health Committee at 9 a.m. Wednesday in the Statehouse.

Nakima Williams, Planned Parent Southeast vice president of public policy, said Monday the bills are all designed to restrict access to legal abortions in Alabama. Planned Parenthood is urging people to speak against the bills on Wednesday.

And she urged lawmakers to consider expanding health care in the state, not limiting it.

"There is no talk of expanding Medicaid to ensure that a woman has the health care she needs, but we see bill after bill that restricts access to health care for women," Williams said.

[Alabama bill would allow agreement with colleges from other states offering online courses \(al.com\)](#)

Alabama lawmakers are considering legislation to allow the state's colleges and universities to participate in reciprocal online course offerings with schools in other states.

The Tuscaloosa News reports House Bill 321 is sponsored by Rep. Bill Poole, a Tuscaloosa Republican. Poole says he met with the Alabama Commission on Higher Education and educators when he crafted the bill.

The legislation would tweak part of Alabama law to allow accredited out-of-state schools participating in a regional agreement approved by the governor to operate in Alabama.

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools would likely be the accrediting authority, and the agreement would be overseen by the Southern Regional Education Board, said Alabama Commission on Higher Education Director Gregory Fitch. He added that the bill would streamline the method out of states institutions would have to use to operate in Alabama under certain conditions. "The key to it is they have to be part of the agreement," he said.

States included in the Southern Regional Education Board are Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia.

The bill has won support from some University System of Alabama officials.

[House to hold vote on increasing statute of limitations for crimes \(TimesDaily\)](#)

A bill that would increase the statute of limitations for serious crimes is ready for a vote in the Alabama House of Representatives.

Alabama Securities Commission Director Joseph Borg said the bill is an important one in that it increases the statute of limitations from three to five years on securities and financial fraud, as well as other major crimes that currently have a three-year statute.

"Under current law, the three years starts whenever the crime started," said Borg. "Most of the larger security cases have a large amount of financial documents that may take years to discover."

"This bill not only increases the time to five years, but also pushes back the time of the crime to when it was discovered."

Alabama Rep. Paul DeMarco, R-Jefferson, chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, announced Thursday that House Bill 325 has moved out of committee and is ready for a vote in the House.

As the sponsor, DeMarco said, "I sincerely believe that this bill will significantly help Alabamians protect their financial investments in the future. We can't afford to let criminals get away with cheating people out of their life savings, and this bill will improve the ability of law enforcement officials to prosecute criminals who orchestrate long-term financial and investment schemes."

DeMarco said he hopes the bill comes to a vote within the next two weeks.

Borg said the bill is important and will significantly assist law enforcement in the prosecution of serious crimes that are categorized as felonies in Alabama.

Currently, the state only has three years to investigate and prosecute most felony offenses. Most states and the federal government provide for longer periods of time.

The additional time will significantly aid law enforcement in gathering evidence that could lead to charges, Borg said. He said complex economic and financial crimes are difficult to detect and are often not reported to law enforcement until after the present three-year statute of limitations has already lapsed.

[Insufficiently Republican? State GOP to consider challenges to 18 candidates for office \(al.com\)](#)

The Alabama Republican Party on Friday and Saturday will hear challenges to 18 candidates seeking state office under the party banner.

Two of those candidates are from the Mobile area.

Mobile resident David Preston has challenged James Hall's candidacy in Alabama House of Representatives District 64, which includes parts of Baldwin and Monroe counties. Meanwhile, Baldwin County Republican Party Vice Chairman John Stetzinger has challenged lawyer Ginger Poynter's GOP candidacy for a Baldwin County District Court judgeship.

According to a report from the Alabama Political Reporter, other challenged candidates have been challenged for taking donations from the Alabama Education Association. They include state Rep. Todd Greeson, R-Ider; William Garreth Moore, who is running for the state Senate against incumbent Jimmy Holley, R-Elba, in District 31; and Tim Sprayberry, who is running against Sen. Gerald Dial, R-Lineville, in District 13.

Alabama Republican Party Chairman Bill Armistead said the 21-member Candidate Committee will hold a series of closed 30-minute hearings Friday and Saturday in Montgomery and will rule on the challenges by the end of the day Saturday. Challenges can center on technical qualifications – such as living in the wrong district or having a criminal record – or matters of party loyalty.

In the early days of the Republican Party in Alabama, when the state was part of the “Solid South” dominated by Democrats, the GOP did everything it could to broaden participation within its ranks. As it has grown more powerful, so have calls to enforce party discipline. The party is on record as supporting a “closed” primary where only registered Republicans can participate, but the Legislature has not passed the proposal.

“I predicted if it wasn’t passed, we would see more of these challenges,” Armistead said. “That’s what happened this time.”

Insufficiently Republican?

Hall, who tried to run as an independent in a special election for Congress but failed to gather enough signatures to appear on the ballot, qualified to challenge state Rep. Harry Shiver, R-Bay Minette, in the GOP primary. But Preston filed a challenge with party officials in Birmingham, arguing that Hall should be removed because of his past actions and statements.

Preston has argued that Hall should be removed based on his independent candidacy for Congress and statements he made during the campaign. He pointed specifically to a statement Hall made in September on Facebook.

“If we don’t fight against the establishment of elite politicians, we will never get this country headed in the right direction,” he wrote in September.

Hall declined to comment, but got public support Monday from one of his former Republican opponents in the congressional race.

Conservative journalist Quin Hillyer, who finished fourth in the GOP primary for the 1st Congressional District seat in September, said he has no opinion about whether Shiver or Hall should represent District 64. But he said kicking Hall off the ballot is a bad idea.

"I am firmly against it," he said. "I don't know the guy outside of that race for Congress. He was an opponent. I have no interest other than basic fairness."

Hillyer said the party bylaws allow for the denial of ballot access to incumbent Republicans who endorse Democrats or harm the party in some other way. Hall did neither, he said.

"James Hall said or did nothing in that race that was detrimental to the Republican Party," he said, adding that the bylaws do not "say anything about running on your own and then deciding you want to become a Republican."

Hillyer said Hall ran for Congress with honor and did not tear anybody down. His beef, Hillyer said, was that the Republican Party was not holding true to its conservative principles.

Opposition to Roy Moore cited in Baldwin race

In Baldwin County, Stetzinger said he challenged Poynter based on her support for Democratic former Jefferson County Circuit Judge Robert Vance against Alabama Supreme Court Chief Justice Roy Moore in the 2012 election.

"She openly supported the challenger to Judge Roy Moore during the general election, as well as gave him money," said Stetzinger, a retired Army soldier. "That's against party rules."

The Baldwin County Republican Party Executive Committee voted to support Stetzinger's challenge.

Poynter, who is seeking to unseat Baldwin County District Judge Michelle Thomason, said the challenge is payback for taking on an incumbent.

"People ask all the time why lawyers don't run against sitting judges. This is just proof," she said. "You don't stand up to a sitting judge."

Poynter said she has been a registered Republican in Texas, North Carolina and Alaska. She said she graduated from conservative icon Pat Robertson's law school, supported Moore's Ten Commandments crusade and has been "accused of being more right than Attila the Hun."

But Poynter said she had to draw the line at defying a federal court order, which Moore did when he refused to take down a Ten Commandments model that he had erected at the Alabama Judicial Building, prompting his removal from office.

Conservative group to bring its anti-union campaign to Alabama (al.com)

A conservative group with ties to anti-tax activist Grover Norquist is bringing its anti-union campaign to Alabama's Mercedes-Benz plant, where the United Auto Workers is trying to organize.

The Center for Worker Freedom helped defeat a UAW drive at the Volkswagen plant in Chattanooga, Tenn., last week in an effort that include billboards, radio ads and town hall meetings.

There has been speculation that a UAW loss at Volkswagen would sap its attempts to organize other auto plants in the South.

But it could actually make the union redouble its efforts elsewhere, including Mercedes in Tuscaloosa County, because it needs a victory now more than ever, said Matt Patterson, executive director of the Center for Worker Freedom.

"This is not a threat that is going away," he said.

The Center for Worker Freedom is a special project of Norquist's Americans For Tax Reform. The group has not disclosed how much it spent on its efforts in Chattanooga, and Patterson declined to discuss the particulars of funding.

He said he will be in Alabama next week, meeting with community and business leaders.

Patterson's message is that the UAW is bad for business and it is intertwined with the bankruptcy of Detroit, the longtime hub of the U.S. auto industry.

"We'll be starting a coalition and getting a ground game going there, meeting people and learning about the concerns of the community," he said. "We hope that the business community of Tuscaloosa will not be late to realize the threat that the union poses."

On Saturday, a leader of the UAW effort at Mercedes said the goal of organizing a union at the plant has not changed.

Mercedes employee Jim Spitzley blamed groups like Patterson's and Tennessee state politicians for scaring Volkswagen workers.

"All transnational automotive plant workers need to wake up and fight for what's right in the workplace, and that's having a voice in the workplace," he said.

Other issues among employees who support the UAW is Mercedes' use of temporary workers at the plant.

They also have accused their employer of harassment and intimidation amid the union campaign. Mercedes says it has done nothing improper.

New Alabama Power CEO talks economic development, regulations affecting utility (Montgomery Advertiser)

Mark Crosswhite doesn't like the word "initiative," saying it too often brings up ideas he calls "flash in the pan." Instead, the new Alabama Power Co. CEO wants to stress continuity.

"I would say things are probably not going to change drastically for a long time," Crosswhite said late last week, a few days after being named CEO of the state's largest private utility. "Our interests are focused on providing reliable, affordable electric service to our customers. That's always at the top."

And Crosswhite said that means market conditions will continue to determine the company's energy portfolio — once heavily reliant on coal, today somewhat less so. It also means the utility will continue to push for economic development and keep an eye on regulations aimed at cutting the nation's carbon emissions, a key contributor to climate change.

Crosswhite, 51, has been with Southern Company since 2004, and has previously served as chief operating officer for Southern Company, Alabama Power's parent company. Prior to joining Southern Company, Crosswhite worked in the energy division of Birmingham's Balch and Bingham law firm for 17 years. He will succeed Charles McCrary, who will retire on May 1 after 12 years as the head of the company.

Crosswhite steps into the position a few months after Alabama Power and other utilities were wrapped up in an attempt to have a formal rate review. PSC commissioner Terry Dunn and a number of groups,

including Alabama Arise and AARP, had pushed for reviews of the rates charged by the utility, as well as those charged by Alagasco and Mobile Gas.

The utility has not seen such a review since 1983, and commission president Twinkle Andress Cavanaugh and commissioner Jeremy Oden ultimately voted against the proposal. Cavanaugh has claimed "environmental extremists" would hijack such a process.

The PSC ultimately voted to use a new measurement formula for Alabama Power's return on common equity, which takes into account the utility's debt structure. Cavanaugh and Oden said the change would ultimately save money over the long haul, but critics argued it would only make it difficult to compare the utility's rates with other states.

Crosswhite said he watched the proceedings from afar, but did not think the utility's cost of capital "was in any way unjustified."

"Obviously, the Public Service Commission is the company's regulator, and it's their prerogative to have investigations when they think they're appropriate," he said. "It did not appear to me that the proceeding was necessary. But the commission had the proceeding. I think it came to a fair conclusion."

According to the U.S. Energy Information Agency, in November Alabama's average retail price of electricity to the residential sector was \$10.75 per kilowatt hour, lower than the national average of \$12.09 kw/hr and slightly higher than the East South regional average of \$10.31 kw/hr.

Industrial customers paid an average of \$5.65 kw/h that month, the lowest in the East South region. Low industrial electricity rates have been cited as a factor in drawing customers to Alabama, and Crosswhite said economic development would continue to be a priority for the utility.

"A lot of us have kids in their teen years or their early 20s, and they're trying to decide where to settle," he said. "We want them to be here. We know that means they're going to have to have careers they can have in the state."

The company does not plan to build any new power plants until 2030 at the earliest, but Crosswhite said the company will try to keep up with regulations from Washington, in particular those related to carbon, a by-product of coal burning.

Last month, the Environmental Protection Agency proposed a rule limiting coal plants to 1,100 pounds of carbon dioxide per megawatt hour, less than what the average coal plant current emits. Crosswhite

said the utility had spent \$3 billion over the past 10 years complying with regulations; the company reported operating revenues of \$5.5 billion in 2012.

"It's a challenge because the bar is never static," he said. "The rule is set. We satisfy that rule, then another rule is set on top of it. It makes future planning very difficult when the rules are evolving."

The utility has moved away from coal in recent years. Southern Company actually burned more natural gas than coal in 2012 and 2013. Crosswhite called those market-based decisions, aimed at trying to keep prices down for consumers. The recent cold snap throughout the country, he said, has raised the price of natural gas and made coal more attractive.

"We do believe very strongly that the answer for us is to have a very diverse fuel mix," he said. "When the price of natural gas goes down, we can burn natural gas and take advantage of those prices. When natural gas prices go up, we can have the coal fleet run."

Crosswhite said the utility was "exploring renewables to see where it makes economic sense for our customers."

Ala. exports fall just shy of record-setting 2012 (Montgomery Advertiser)

Despite a huge decrease in coal exports, the increase in exported vehicles and parts helped Alabama export \$19.3 billion in products in 2013, just shy of the state's all-time record set in 2012, according to figures from the U.S. Department of Commerce.

Although the total value of Alabama exports dipped 1 percent from 2012's record high of \$19.6 billion, Alabama exports have surged 57 percent since 2009.

The 2013 export total occurred despite sluggish economies in many parts of the world, according to Alabama Department of Commerce Secretary Greg Canfield.

"Our department along with the members of the Export Alabama Alliance have been concentrating on helping small and medium companies find new markets," Canfield said in an email.

“Growing our companies through exports has so much potential to create jobs. We’re still seeing strong growth with our major trading partners and expect that trend to continue, which will mean more exports and therefore more jobs.”

Vehicles and parts continued to be Alabama’s major export, as it has been since 1998 when it totaled a little more than \$1 billion. It topped \$7.1 billion in 2013. Total exports in transportation equipment were \$8.3 billion.

But these increases, along with increases in chemicals and primary metal manufacturing, were partially offset by a 21.7 percent decrease in minerals and ores (largely coal) and a 15 percent decrease in machinery exports.

Alabama ranked No. 23 among the states for dollar value of exports in 2013.

Here are some of the numbers:

Alabama's top five exports in 2013

- Transportation equipment (\$8.3 billion, with 8.6 percent growth)
- Chemicals (\$2.5 billion, with a decrease of 3 percent)
- Primary metal manufacturing (\$1.5 billion, with 3.9 percent growth)
- Minerals and ores (\$1.4 billion, with a decrease of 21.7 percent)
- Machinery (\$879 million, with a decrease of 15 percent)

Alabama's top five export markets in 2013

- Canada (\$4.3 billion, with 8 percent growth)
- China (\$2.5 billion, with 3.6 percent growth)
- Germany (\$2.2 billion, with a decrease of 12 percent)
- Mexico (\$2.2 billion, with 9 percent growth)
- United Kingdom (\$693 million, with 1 percent growth)

Congressional Republicans are focused on calming their divided ranks (Washington Post)

By Robert Costa, Published: February 17

After a tumultuous week of party infighting and leadership stumbles, congressional Republicans are focused on calming their divided ranks in the months ahead, mostly by touting proposals that have wide backing within the GOP and shelving any big-ticket legislation for the rest of the year.

Comprehensive immigration reform, tax reform, tweaks to the federal health-care law — bipartisan deals on each are probably dead in the water for the rest of this Congress.

“We don’t have 218 votes in the House for the big issues, so what else are we going to do?” said Rep. Devin Nunes (Calif.), an ally of House Speaker John A. Boehner (Ohio). “We can do a few things on immigration and work on our principles, but in terms of real legislating, we’re unable to get in a good negotiating position.”

Added Frank Luntz, a Republican pollster who works closely with party leaders: “It is an acknowledgment of where they stand, where nothing can happen in divided government so we may essentially have the status quo. Significant immigration reform and fundamental tax reform are probably not going to happen.”

GOP brass in both chambers have shifted their focus to stability, looking to avoid intraparty drama, rally behind incumbents and build Republicans’ ground game ahead of November’s midterm elections, where they hope to be competitive in a slew of Senate races and hold on to the party’s 17-seat House majority.

In that vein, championing a handful bills on job growth, energy and regulatory policy — all targeted at courting swing voters but unlikely to win Democratic support — has become a priority, with party leaders planning to spend months seeking consensus among Republicans and avoiding talks on controversial matters.

“It’s a natural progression,” said Republican Vin Weber, a former Minnesota congressman. “If you’re a Republican in Congress, you’ve learned that when we shut down the government, we lose. Now that we’ve had some success in avoiding another shutdown, our fortunes seem to be rising, so maybe we don’t want big things to happen.”

Republican leaders are also quite aware of voters' skepticism about the GOP's policies, and most believe that a softer sell, rather than an assertive attempt to pass major bills, is a smart play. A Washington Post-ABC News poll in January found that just 19 percent of Americans have confidence in congressional Republicans to make the right decisions for the country, while 80 percent do not.

In late January, House Republican leaders launched their small-ball strategy with a letter to President Obama after the State of the Union address, where they "identified four initial areas" of potential agreement — citing job creation, natural-gas development, workplace rules and federally funded research but few items that could cause unrest with the party's powerful bloc of conservatives.

In an article published Thursday by the National Review, House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-Va.) underscored the leadership's approach. "While we will tackle many issues this year in Congress, we will focus on four key areas that demand our immediate attention," he wrote, once again talking up Republican proposals on job growth and energy, as well as on education and tax policy.

Left unmentioned by Cantor: brokering a compromise on immigration reform and adjusting the federal minimum wage — two issues at the top of the agenda for Obama and congressional Democrats.

At a news conference last week, Boehner blamed Obama for the partisan tensions and criticized him for not responding to the GOP's January letter. "We've seen no response from the president — nothing," he said. "If the president won't work with us on these simple issues, who would ever expect that he'd be able to work with us on the more complex issues that we face?"

This month, Boehner also threw cold water on the prospect of an immigration-reform package landing on the president's desk this year.

"There's widespread doubt about whether this administration can be trusted to enforce our laws," Boehner said. "And it's going to be difficult to move any immigration legislation until that changes."

This development on Capitol Hill — rarely articulated as an orchestrated slowdown beyond private huddles — is part of a push by GOP leaders to avoid sensational headlines and headaches. For example, many of them, including Boehner, would like to see aspects of immigration reform enacted. But because of party dynamics, they know it's unlikely — and if pursued with any seriousness this spring, it could lead to a tea party rebellion.

At the House GOP's annual retreat in January, Republicans spent most sessions discussing how to frame the party's pitch to middle-class voters and get through the debate over suspending the debt ceiling. Influential voices, such as Boehner and Rep. Paul Ryan (R-Wis.), devoted their speeches to the

necessity of a united front and pressuring the president to support the Keystone XL pipeline, among other issues that could be helpful on the campaign trail.

The appetite there for anything resembling a grand bargain on immigration, taxes or health-care reform was nonexistent, according to several aides present, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because the meetings were confidential.

On health care, Republicans will offer their own wholesale substitute for the Affordable Care Act in the spring or summer, making full repeal of the law a keystone of their election-year message.

Republican operatives said the GOP's slowing pace is unsurprising, given the party's internal squabbles and the usual pattern ahead of midterm elections, a period that has rarely provided moments for ambitious bipartisan legislating.

"There is clearly a desire among Republicans in Congress to move forward, and everyone is working through where they could find potentially find consensus," said David Winston, a Republican strategist who advises Boehner. "But you've got to see where the differences are and try to resolve them, while staying focused on offering an alternative."

In the meantime, avoiding unruly theatrics and trying to package the GOP as a ready-to-govern party is the leadership's chief concern.

"We're not going to make ourselves the story," Boehner said in a speech to his colleagues Tuesday, before moving to pass a "clean" debt-ceiling extension — one without strings attached. A day later, as Senate Republicans openly battled during an hour-long vote on that legislation, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) echoed Boehner in a terse cloakroom talk during which he criticized the discord.

Democrats have seized on Republicans' hesitancy to pursue hot-button issues, arguing that it is evidence of crippling division. On Friday, Vice President Biden, speaking at House Democrats' retreat in Cambridge, Md., said, "There isn't a Republican Party."

"Between now and November is three political lifetimes," Biden said. "The American people are where we are. And let's go out and make every single effort not just to defend, but to aggressively push our agenda."

But with the federal government's borrowing authority extended through next year and a budget agreement already reached, many Republicans are comfortable with the turn toward campaigning and bills designed to bolster GOP candidates.

"It's over, it's finished after the debt ceiling," Nunes said. "In the House, we've got 30 guys who don't want to support anything, ever, unless it balances the budget next year."