



Office of Senate President Pro Tempore Del Marsh
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Friday, February 28, 2014

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Alabama Senate OKs Education Trust Fund budget: Funding included to hire 250 new middle school teachers, give teachers a 1 percent bonus (Montgomery Advertiser)

The Alabama Senate Thursday voted 21 to 10 to approve a \$5.9 billion Education Trust Fund budget that includes funding to hire 250 new middle school teachers, give teachers a 1 percent bonus and cut \$10.8 million from Alabama State University's budget.

The budget now goes to the House of Representatives. In the local delegation, Sen. Quinton Ross, D-Montgomery, voted no and Sen. Dick Brewbaker, R-Montgomery, abstained. Both expressed varying degrees of concern with the funding situation for ASU, which Senate Finance and Taxation Education committee chair Trip Pittman, R-Daphne said was aimed at assisting new president Gwendolyn Boyd make changes at the school.

Lawmakers left the debate in general agreement that there ought to be more money for the state's students, teachers and support personnel, and divergent views on the state's capacity to provide it. Pittman insisted during the floor debate that revenues projections for the Education Trust Fund were not as strong as forecast a few months ago.

"Education in this state K-12, needs more revenue to do the things they need to do," Pittman said after the vote. "But in this state, we have to try to balance our revenue and appropriations. We have to."

Others criticized the budget for eliminating a proposed 2 percent pay raise for teachers proposed by Gov. Robert Bentley and not providing funding to help them purchase supplies for their classrooms. Sen. Roger Bedford, D-Russellville, argued the budget would end up increasing costs for teachers because of Republican lawmakers eliminating a proposal by Gov. Robert Bentley to increase the state share of teacher and support employees' insurance.

"It cuts the pay to teachers, both active and retired," he said. "It does not fund textbooks and it still requires parents to pay out of their pocket for tissues and toilet paper. That's a bad budget."

Among Republicans, Sens. Scott Beason of Gardendale, Bill Holtzclaw of Madison and Paul Sanford of Huntsville joined six Democrats and Sen. Harri Anne Smith, I-Slocomb voting against the budget. Democrats Billy Beasley of Clayton, Tammy Irons of Florence and Marc Keahey of Grove Hill voted for it.

Pittman included a \$10.8 million cut to Alabama State University, by far the largest cut to colleges and universities in the budget. The budget would give ASU a \$10 million first conditional appropriation, the

release of which would be in Bentley's hands. The Senate turned back a proposal from Ross to move about \$3 million in liability funds to ASU.

Brewbaker said afterward that the vote on the budget, whose final contours will be set in a conference committee between the House and Senate, was "theater." However, he said that the ASU funding shift would only have an impact "if the governor was on board." Bentley said Wednesday he was not involved in the discussions and did not support the move.

The proposal provides a \$1.5 million increase for transportation; a \$2.8 million increase for textbooks and a \$6 million increase toward operating expenses for schools. The cost of hiring additional middle school teachers is about \$10 million; the cost of the bonus for teachers is about \$34 million.

The budget also would include \$62 million to repay the Rainy Day Account, a credit line from the Alabama Trust Fund designed to offset budget cuts when revenue projections fall. The account, emptied in 2009, must be repaid by July, 2015.

The ETF gets most of its funding from income and sales taxes, which are highly sensitive to positive and negative shifts in the economy, and Pittman said he wanted to avoid midyear cuts to the budgets, known as proration.

"The projections for what may happen this year are uncertain," Pittman said on the floor. "My job is to only budget what we'll have to spend."

Pittman said he was "confident" the budget would not fall into proration. Sen. Gerald Dial, R-Lineville, praised the additional funding for middle school teachers.

"Most of schools we've got in state that are failing are middle schools," he said. "And that's a critical time in a child's life."

Bentley proposed raising the state's monthly contribution from \$714 per employee to \$795, in the hopes of addressing an estimated \$120 million deficit in the Public Education Employees' Health Insurance Program (PEEHIP); the budget approved by the Senate eliminated that raise, which could mean increased out-of-pocket costs for participants.

Pittman said he hoped the Public Education Employees' Health Insurance Board could use existing reserves to address the shortfall.

"We encourage them to use those to the extent possible to mitigate those increases," he said.

Bedford introduced an amendment that would have moved \$3 million in liability funding to purchases for toilet paper and tissues in classrooms. The amendment was defeated, along with a subsequent amendment from Bedford to move about \$20 million from repayment of the state's Rainy Day Account to daily operations for public schools.

Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh, R-Anniston, said he was doubtful the teacher pay issue or other matters would be reopened in the House or by House Ways and Means Education chair Bill Poole, R-Tuscaloosa.

"The budget chairs work together, and I don't see Sen. Pittman sending a budget to Rep. Poole with a major change," he said. "And I consider backing off the bonus a major change."

[Alabama Senate approves education budget that includes 1 percent teachers' bonus, cut for ASU \(al.com\)](#)

MONTGOMERY, Alabama ---The Alabama Senate today approved an education budget plan that includes a 1 percent bonus for school employees and a 25 percent cut for Alabama State University.

The \$5.9 billion budget would provide \$10 million to hire about 250 more middle school teachers statewide.

Adding middle school teachers is a priority for the state Department of Education, which requested funding for 450 more.

The budget now goes to the House. It's for the fiscal year that starts Oct. 1.

The Republican-led Senate rejected several amendments offered by Democrats. Republicans shut off the debate and forced a vote on the budget at about 4:30 p.m.

The Senate approved the budget by a vote of 21-10.

Gov. Robert Bentley proposed a 2 percent raise for employees in K-12 schools and two-year colleges. The Senate budget committee changed that to a 1 percent, one-time bonus.

The 1 percent bonus would cost \$34.7 million, according to the Legislative Fiscal Office. A 2 percent raise would cost about \$75 million annually.

Sen. Trip Pittman, R-Montrose, sponsor of the budget bill and chairman of the Senate budget committee, said teachers deserved a 2 percent raise but said he did not think one would be sustainable because of uncertainty about revenues, repayments owed to the rainy day account and other factors.

The average salary of Alabama teachers is \$48,355, according to the LFO.

Democrats said the budget would result in a pay cut for school employees because it does not include a raise and will result in them having to pay more for health insurance.

"It cuts the pay of teachers, both active and retired, it does not fund textbooks and it still requires parents to pay out of their pocket for tissues and toilet paper. That's a bad budget," Sen. Roger Bedford, D-Russellville said.

Bedford offered an amendment to move \$20 million allocated for rainy day repayment to school operating expenses, but it was rejected. He offered another to shift \$3 million from a liability insurance program Democrats say is not needed to a "toilet paper and paper towel" line item in the budget, but it was killed.

Bedford said parents are paying for school supplies like toilet tissue and should not have to.

Three of the Senate's 23 Republicans voted against the budget.

Sen. Scott Beason, R-Gardendale, said he opposed the 35 percent increase for pre-kindergarten, which would get \$38.5 million.

"I am not for supporting taxpayer-funded daycare known as pre-k, when we have other pressing needs in the education budget," Beason said.

Increased funding for pre-kindergarten was a priority for the governor, and the Senate retained his recommendation. Alabama has a highly regarded voluntary pre-k program, but it's not widely available.

A Republican senator from Montgomery County abstained from voting on the budget because of the Alabama State cut.

Sen. Dick Brewbaker, R-Pike Road, said he wanted to talk with officials at Alabama State about its appropriation. Pittman said he took \$10 million from ASU's line item and made it conditional on the governor's approval to give new ASU President Gwendolyn Boyd leverage in making changes at ASU.

Brewbaker said he did not think that would work unless the governor was part of the plan to do that, and Bentley said he was not.

"For this to have any importance or do any good, the governor has to be on board with it," Brewbaker said.

ASU's Boyd issued a statement today saying she did not agree to a \$10 million cut. Rep. John Knight of Montgomery vowed to fight to restore the funding when the budget comes to the House.

This evening, Pittman said he would support restoring the \$10 million to ASU's line item. He said he planned to work with the House budget chairman, Rep. Bill Poole of Tuscaloosa, to do that.

Six Senate Democrats voted against the budget, as did independent Sen. Harri Anne Smith of Slocumb.

Three Democrats, Sens. Billy Beasley of Clayton, Tammy Irons of Florence and Marc Keahey of Grove Hill, voted for the budget.

Updated Taxpayer Bill of Rights passes Alabama Senate (Yellowhammer News)

The Alabama Taxpayer Bill of Rights passed out of the Alabama Senate Thursday after a prolonged debate and over the objections of Senate Democrats.

The bill seeks to remove the Alabama Dept. of Revenue from the tax assessment appeals process because they essentially have a vested interest in siding with the state in such appeals.

TBOR would abolish the Alabama Dept. of Revenue's Administrative Law Division and create a new state commission called the Alabama Tax Appeal Commission, which would serve as an independent Tax Tribunal. Unsurprisingly, because the bill makes changes to a government bureaucracy that has been in place since 1983, the Revenue Dept. has balked at relinquishing their power to decide appeals. They have even argued that the bill creates a new bureaucracy. In reality, The bill simply moves the Administrative Law Division out of the Dept. of Revenue, including its budget, to a new independent entity, the Alabama Tax Appeals Commission. There is no additional cost. It simply creates independence for the first time.

Alabama is currently among the minority of states that lack an independent tax appeals tribunal. As a result, the state recently received a "D" on the new State Tax Due Process Scorecard issued by the Council On State Taxation.

TBOR brought together conservative grassroots groups and the Business Council of Alabama (BCA), both of which pushed hard for the bill's passage.

"Alabama taxpayers finally can claim victory with today's passage of TBOR," said BCA President and CEO Billy Canary. "For years, the Business Council of Alabama has been working on behalf of Alabama taxpayers to pass this commonsense legislation that levels the playing field in the tax appeals process by separating the tax adjudicator from the tax collector. Since the beginning, the singular goal of this legislation has been fairness, and the BCA commends the Alabama Legislature for updating the current TBOR."

TBOR has been a BCA priority for several years, as a majority of states have adopted some form of the independent tax appeals model. Others in the Alabama business community have joined forces with the BCA in support of the legislation under the banner of the Business Associations' Tax Coalition (BATC), which includes 27-member business and trade associations. Attempts to pass this legislation stretch back to the late 1990s.

The bill now heads to the House, which passed a similar version of the bill earlier in the session.

[Alabama Senate passes bill to regulate wind farms \(al.com\)](#)

MONTGOMERY, Alabama --- The Alabama Senate passed a bill today to regulate wind farms.

Senate Bill 12 by Sen. Phil Williams, R-Rainbow City, would require wind mill companies to be regulated by the Public Service Commission.

The location, design, installation and operation of wind farms would be regulated. Wind farms would need approval from local governments.

Williams said there are wind farm projects proposed in at least eight Alabama counties -- Madison, Jackson, DeKalb, St. Clair, Etowah, Cherokee, Cleburne and Baldwin.

The senator said one project called for windmills in his district more than 500 feet tall.

He said there is no regulation of such projects under current Alabama law.

The bill passed by a vote of 24-6 and moves to the House.

Senate OKs revisions to Alabama Open Meetings Act (Montgomery Advertiser)

The Senate voted 25 to 1 on Thursday to approve legislation aimed at strengthening the state's Open Meetings Act, which critics said had been gutted by recent Alabama Supreme Court decisions.

The legislation, sponsored by Sen. Cam Ward, R-Alabaster, would forbid members of public bodies from meeting in ways to avoid the provisions of the law; require the Legislature to conduct its meetings in public and give the public standing to challenge open meeting violations in court.

"In this day and age, when public opinion in government is at an all-time low, one thing we can do to restore that confidence is to restore government in the light of day," Ward said after the vote. "The good the bad and the ugly of government, but at least they'll see it."

In 2012, the Alabama Supreme Court ruled that the Montgomery County Board of Education did not violate the Open Meetings Act when members of the board met to hear then-Superintendent Barbara Thompson outline her plans for the school year — but the policy statement was broken up into a series of meetings in which she met with only two or three members at a time. The court said act's definition of "meeting" meant that the meetings held by the Montgomery BOE members did not constitute a violation of the act.

Last year, the Supreme Court ruled that two Alabama Public Television executives who claimed they were fired in secret by the governing commission of the network did not have standing to bring a claim, even if the commission violated the Open Meetings Act. Among other findings, the court said the pair could not receive civil penalties under the law, and because any fines assessed against the commission for breaking the law would be paid to the state, not the plaintiffs, the two lacked standing to bring the suit.

In a case last year involving the fallout from the Alabama Accountability Act, the Supreme Court ruled lawmakers have "unlimited powers to determine the rules governing their own proceedings," barring a

violation of the state Constitution. The Alabama Constitution requires the door of the Legislature to remain open, but the court ruled that did not necessarily extend to meetings.

"The Alabama Constitution does not require the Legislature to conduct its meetings in public," the court ruled 8 to 0. The legislation affirms that the Legislature must hold meetings in public but does not get into committee meetings. Ward said a constitutional amendment likely would be required to address that.

The bill was hung up for several weeks as lawmakers negotiated definitions of serial meetings; Ward said groups representing counties and cities wanted to be sure social meetings between public officials would not constitute violations. The bill defines serial meeting as a government body intentionally meeting twice in a seven-day period to deliberate about a vote, without a quorum or public notice.

The bill now moves onto the House.

Ten Commandments bill on way to Alabama Senate after passing out of committee (al.com)

MONTGOMERY, Alabama -- A bill to make way for the Ten Commandments in public buildings, such as courthouses and schools, passed out of an Alabama Senate committee Thursday, sending it to the full Senate for a vote as early as next week.

If passed by the state Senate and signed by the governor, the state would put a constitutional amendment on the next ballot to let Alabama voters decide the issue.

Last week, the Alabama House approved the same bill after more than two hours of meandering and sometimes factually inaccurate debate.

In the Constitution, Campaign Finance, Ethics and Elections Committee meeting Thursday, the committee chairman, Sen. Bryan Taylor, R-Prattville, said that debate has him concerned about the so-called "Lemon test" the courts use to determine whether a law is constitutional.

"The federal courts will look at a law and determine whether it is constitutional or not by its content or its purpose," Taylor said. "If there is a record of a purpose to establish a particular religion, then certainly someone could make an issue of that."

However, Sen. Trip Pittman, R-Daphne, said the value of the Ten Commandments can be seen in the people who have followed them.

"The people who have followed those commandments have inhabited most of the world," Sen. Trip Pittman said.

"And how do we know that? Because the people who have followed those commandments have inhabited most of the world," he said. "They have procreated. They have remained healthy. They have respected private property. They haven't borne false witness, which is now rampant on the Internet and caused all kinds of tragedies."

For Pittman, that value is secondary to the bill's constitutionality.

"We talk about the constitutionality of them, but we have to understand the purpose of these is the laws of God," he said. "And we think they may have passed irrelevance because of the constitutional question, but beyond that, which is the most important, it's also about behavior and conduct through the ages."

[Senate committee approves bill to put more teeth in gambling laws \(al.com\)](#)

MONTGOMERY, Alabama --- A Senate committee today approved a bill that would put more teeth in the law against gambling operations.

Under current law, it's a misdemeanor to promote gambling, conspire to promote gambling or possess a gambling machine.

Sen. Bryan Taylor, R-Prattville, sponsor of the bill, said gambling operations can be so profitable that the law is ineffective.

He used an example of an operator who was convicted of having electronic gambling machines in Jefferson County and then opened up a gambling facility in neighboring St. Clair County.

"The money is a tremendous incentive to break the law," Taylor said.

Sen. Billy Beasley, D-Clayton, voted against the bill. Beasley's district includes VictoryLand.

The attorney general's office and state troopers shut down the casino a year ago after determining that the machines there were illegal gambling devices and not electronic bingo.

Beasley said Macon County lost 2,000 jobs and its schools and other county services have suffered. He said VictoryLand was a legal operation under a constitutional amendment approved by voters.

"We have gaming in the state of Alabama, we have a lack of revenue in the state of Alabama and we have folks who want to participate in gaming," Beasley said. "They go across state lines. This is 2014. You've got electronic bingo on the Internet."

Taylor countered that his bill would not change what is considered legal or illegal, but would only make the penalties more effective.

Under current law, the gambling crimes are a Class A misdemeanor, which can bring a maximum of one year in jail. Taylor's bill would make them a Class C felony, which calls for a prison sentence of up to 10 years.

Beasley asked if people in Alabama bet on sports and if they should be prosecuted.

Taylor said booking operations for sports betting would be subject to the bill.

The Senate's Constitution, Campaign Finance, Ethics and Elections Committee approved the bill, with Beasley casting the only dissenting vote. It moves to the Senate.

Taylor said he was uncertain of the bill's chances to become law. He said it was filibustered last year.

[AEA asks appeals court to reconsider ban on payroll deductions for union dues \(al.com\)](#)

Attorneys for the Alabama Education Association are asking a federal appeals court to reconsider its Feb. 5 ruling that allowed a state law to go into effect and block the union's primary funding source, state payroll deductions.

The filing to the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals argues the three-judge panel erred when it removed a lower court injunction protecting the payroll deductions. The AEA attorneys want the full 11th Circuit

Court panel to take up its claims that the law's definition of "political activity" is unconstitutionally vague and leaves the AEA in an untenable position.

The politically charged AEA dues ban measure was passed in December 2010, shortly before Gov. Bob Riley left office. The law said no government employee may arrange for the automatic deduction of dues "to a membership organization which uses any portion of the dues for political activity."

AEA filed a lawsuit against the ban in Huntsville in 2011, arguing the state ban violated free speech and equal protection guarantees in the U.S. Constitution. The lawsuit argued the Alabama's law discriminated against the AEA based on its political beliefs. The Alabama State Employees Association and the International Association of Fire Fighters, through affiliates in Decatur and Cullman, later joined teachers in contesting the law.

U.S. District Judge Lynwood Smith in March 2011 issued an injunction blocking the law from going into effect. Smith found the law's references to organizations engaged in "political activity" were vague and overly broad.

Alabama appealed that ruling and the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals panel said in its Feb. 5 opinion that Smith erred in issuing the injunction.

"The Act does not prohibit 'private forms of payment, i.e., forms of payment not facilitated by the government,'" the court found. "This compels the conclusions that the Act only declines to promote speech, rather than abridging it, and that the Act does not implicate any constitutionally protected conduct, much less a substantial amount."

In ruling the law was not overly vague the 11th Circuit cited activities of the AEA and its political arm, A-Vote.

"Some of AEA and A-VOTE's conduct indisputably falls within the Act's definition of political activity ...," the court said.

The 11th Circuit panel found the AEA was unlikely to win on the merits of its claims and ordered the injunction lifted.

But in the Wednesday filing, the plaintiffs argue it was the panel that erred.

They argued they can bring "challenge to a law where, as here, the law exacts a promise of future conduct as a condition for receiving a benefit from the government and subjects an organization that violates that promise to serious potential penalties."

The AEA's attorneys also contend there are several activities the group is engaged in that were not addressed by the panel, leaving it unclear whether the AEA could face future penalties under the law for those activities.

The AEA attorneys argue the court "ignored the fact that AEA identified various types of issue advocacy--which are by definition not electioneering activities," including communications over members concerns about legislation, editorials in AEA's newsletter critical of a legislator or piece of legislation, "and representing members in disciplinary proceedings pursuant to state legislation forbidding the discipline or discharge of school employees for political reasons," the filing argues.

The plaintiffs requested the full 11th Circuit consider whether the law is vague as it relates to those practices.

Feb. 27 in the Legislature (Montgomery Advertiser)

A look at the action in the Legislature on Thursday, the 19th legislative day.

House of Representatives

- Passed HB 376, sponsored by Rep. Mike Jones, R-Andalusia, which would restore juvenile court exclusive original jurisdiction over all actions for the terminations of parental rights.
- Passed HB 454, sponsored by Rep. Donnie Chesteen, R-Geneva, which would allow school boards to set each school calendar by number of instructional hours instead of days.
- Passed SB 173, sponsored by Sen. Tripp Pittman, R-Daphne, which would require municipalities to disclose certain information about the purchase of real property.
- Passed SB 284, sponsored by Sen. Jimmy Holley, R-Elba, which would require biodegradable plastic containers to be clearly labeled to prevent contamination of recyclable plastic containers
- The House will return at 1 p.m. Tuesday.

Senate

- Passed SB 184, sponsored by Sen. Trip Pittman, R-Daphne, the 2015 Education Trust Fund budget.

- Passed SB 12, sponsored by Sen. Phil Williams, R-Rainbow City, which would create regulations for wind farms.
- Passed SB 191, sponsored by Sen. Cam Ward, R-Alabaster, revising the state's Open Meetings Act.
- Passed SB 303, sponsored by Sen. Linda Coleman, D-Birmingham, allowing individuals who have completed sentences for drug-related felonies or are serving satisfactory probation to qualify for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) benefits.
- The Senate will return at 2 p.m. Tuesday.

Hundreds of college students rally at Alabama State House for more higher education funding (Montgomery Advertiser)

Hundreds of college students have rallied on the Alabama Statehouse steps while legislators inside work on the state education budget.

The Higher Education Day rally on Thursday filled the plaza in front of the State House and spilled over to the Capitol lawn across the street. Students from across the state urged legislators to allocate more money to their universities and help keep tuition down. A junior from Jacksonville State University, Madison Rhoads, said tuition has gone up every year she's been in college.

While the students gathered outside, the state Senate was inside the Statehouse working on the education budget. About 26 percent of the \$5.9 billion budget is allocated for higher education. Students outside the State House called for a bigger share and chanted "one-third."

Alabama's 'second mortgage' on road program could save state \$30 million (Montgomery Advertiser)

WASHINGTON — Alabama will pledge its gas tax revenue in order to get lower interest rates on the money it is borrowing to pay for \$1 billion in transportation projects, under legislation headed to Gov. Robert Bentley's desk.

There are estimates that the move could save the state \$30 million.

Bentley said the extra collateral is needed because the original revenue used to repay the bonds — the federal gas tax — is no longer considered reliable enough on its own. Wall Street has expressed concerns about the risk of the federal payments being interrupted, citing among other issues the earlier government shutdown and debt ceiling threats.

In a recent interview, the governor compared his proposal to getting a second mortgage.

“The state will back up the payment of the bonds behind the federal government, and that will keep our interest rates low,” Bentley said.

Bentley is using proceeds from the bonds — called Grant Anticipation Revenue Vehicles, or GARVEE bonds — to pay 80 percent of the cost of hundreds of road and bridge projects around the state. Local governments are pitching in the remaining 20 percent.

The Alabama Transportation Rehabilitation and Improvement Program (ATRIP) is a windfall for local officials who want to improve public safety by fixing bridges or building roads to attract new businesses.

But Wall Street has expressed concerns about whether Congress can keep the federal highway trust funds solvent and running smoothly for the GARVEE bonds.

Moody’s Investors Service last week downgraded 17 GARVEE bonds from other states, citing the risk of interrupted payments of federal transportation aid to the states.

The risk is caused by “the government’s recurring episodes of threatened debt ceiling expirations, government shutdowns, and the threat of depletion of the highway trust fund balance later this year due to the fund’s persistent structural imbalance,” according to a Feb. 18 statement from Moody’s.

The downgrade affected only “standalone” GARVEE bonds that aren’t backed by additional revenues, according to Moody’s.

The downgrades could cost those states more money than they had anticipated, said Jim Tymon, director of program finance and management with the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials.

“There is so much uncertainty with the federal program, and that is going to end up causing more problems at the state level,” Tymon said at the recent National Governors Association’s winter meeting in Washington.

In late 2012, Moody’s downgraded Alabama’s existing GARVEE bonds, from Aa3 to Aa2, also because of the uncertainty in Washington.

The federal highway trust fund, fueled by the federal gas tax, is projected to run short sometime this summer. If Congress doesn’t shore it up, daily payments to the states — Alabama gets about \$480 million a year — could be delayed.

The bill to backstop the GARVEE bonds with state gas tax revenue passed the Alabama Senate last week and the House on Wednesday night. Both votes were unanimous.

Sen. Gerald Dial, R-Lineville, said he thought the state could save at least \$30 million with the change.

“They’re willing to give us a lower interest rate if we pledge to back up our revenue in case the Feds run out from under us,” Dial said.

Alabama is getting ready to do another \$600 million bond issue for ATRIP, according to Bentley’s spokeswoman, Jennifer Ardis.

Bentley said he doesn’t believe the state would ever have to tap its gas tax money in order to make the annual debt service payments, which are about \$80 million.

“It’s always a threat, but it’s not a likelihood,” Bentley said.

[Stephen Sexton announces candidacy for Senate District 22, prioritizes religion, jobs \(al.com\)](#)

Stephen Sexton, 58, has announced his intention to run as a republican at the June 3 primary for Alabama Senate District 22.

District 22 covers Baldwin, Choctaw, Clarke, Conecuh, Escambia, Mobile, Monroe, and Washington counties.

Sexton decided to run because of jobs, he told Alabama Media Group on Thursday.

"It's something I've been wanting to do for a long time, seeing jobs lost over the last 20 years," said Sexton, who recently retired from the Army after a 20 year career.

"I want to do something to get those jobs back," he said.

If he wins the office, he has three goals in mind-- jobs, education and religion.

Sexton served as a minister for 13 years and graduated from Masters of Divinity from The Pentecostal Seminary. He earned a degree in education from the University of South Alabama as well.

On education, he said working together is key. "Get parents, teachers and business leaders together to find out what we need," he said. "Not ever kid will go to college and kids need to graduate job-ready."

He also emphasized the necessity of a family unit.

"Kids need to know they're loved at home," said Sexton. "Kids need to know that we expect good morals and that begins at home."

He added that church helps.

"Religious leaders and families need to come together," he said.

On how his possible role as senator meshes with religion, Sexton had strong words.

"I don't think that there can be a separation of church and state. I don't think that's what Jefferson meant."

Sexton is running against four other republican candidates for the primary against democratic incumbent Marc Keahey.

[America's 'Most dangerous cities' ranking flawed and inaccurate, Birmingham, Bessemer police say \(al.com\)](#)

Leaders of police agencies in two Jefferson County cities singled out in a listing of America's Most Dangerous cities lashed out at the real estate website that compiled the list, calling the rankings inaccurate, unfair and flawed at best.

Neighborhoodscout.com is a Massachusetts-based search engine for potential home buyers that includes crime statistics, school performance ratings and real estate appreciation rates. The site recently listed three Alabama cities - Bessemer, Birmingham and Gadsden- on its annual list of crime hot spots.

Police and city officials in Bessemer and Birmingham became the latest to refute the site's rankings and methodology. In past years, others have done so, including lawmen in Atlanta and Spartanburg.

"The story is interesting and accomplishes the purpose of driving people to the website, which most of us had never heard of prior to this report," said Birmingham police Chief A.C. Roper. "It's obvious from their math they simply took the reported numbers and divided them by overnight population."

According to the site, the study is of "cities with 25,000 or more people, based on the number of violent crimes per 1,000 residents. Violent crimes include murder, forcible rape, armed robbery and aggravated assault. Data used for this research are 1. The number of violent crimes reported to the FBI to have occurred in each city, and 2. The population of each city.

The site had this to say about Bessemer: "For Bessemer, we found that violent crime rate is one of the highest in the nation, across communities of all sizes (both large and small). Violent offenses tracked included forcible rape, murder and non-negligent manslaughter, armed robbery, and aggravated assault, including assault with a deadly weapon." The site said Bessemer had a crime rate of "142 per 1,000."

As for the Birmingham, the site said the city is safer than only 1 percent of cities in America. Birmingham, they said, has a crime rate of "85 per 1,000." With that rate, they said, Birmingham has one of the highest crime rates in America compared to all communities of all sizes - from the smallest towns to the very largest cities.

In 2013, Bessemer and Birmingham were the two Alabama cities that made the list at 16 and 25. In 2012, Bessemer was the only Alabama city at No. 84.

Bessemer police Chief Nathaniel Rutledge said he disagrees with the site's findings. "I would assume they have the right to report any public information they gather, however, it is unfair to manipulate it as such to unfavorably depict the true image of our community," he said.

While the report, Rutledge said, references a credible source - the FBI - it didn't heed the agency's warning, which pointed out the statistics were preliminary, and based only on six months of reporting. Routinely, the FBI's Uniform Crime Report releases caution against using the data to compare cities, warning that it creates misleading perceptions.

The report, the chief said, does not take into account the size of the city, the demographics or even the number of cities that actually report crimes to the FBI. The reality, Bessemer city officials said, is that major crimes in Bessemer have dropped 25 percent over the past three years, including an 8 percent drop from 2012 to 2013.

Homicides in Bessemer have been cut in half from the 11 reported in 2011, and the double-digit numbers of the years before 2010.

"We've hired additional officers in our police department and plan to hire an additional 15 or so this year," said Toraine Norris, spokesman for Bessemer Mayor Kenneth Gulley. "We're doing our part to make Bessemer safer, and that is reflected in the actual crime numbers collected by our police department, not in a website's flawed rankings."

Birmingham finished 2013 with 66 slayings, down seven over 2012. Roper said 2013 was an extremely challenging year for the department, and for the community.

"We have experienced significant progress in overall crime reduction efforts with an 11 percent decrease in crime in 2012 and another significant reduction in 2013," he said in a January interview, "but homicides continue to be a challenge, not just for Birmingham but many urban areas throughout this nation."

Roper agreed the site's methodology is based on several flawed assumptions, not including the fact that the FBI strongly discourages using the data for comparison.

"In some instances, you're comparing one city's apples with another city's oranges," Roper said. "In fact, some cities report partial numbers and others don't even report at all, so a valid comprehensive listing is impossible."

There is, he said, no mention of any variables, but basically a rudimentary level of research.

"I can't speak for other cities, but Birmingham is experiencing historic reductions in crime, and the hundreds of thousands of people that visit the city each year gives credence to the fact that Birmingham is a city on the rise," Roper said. "We understand there is more work to be done, but the progress has been tremendous."

Main Street Alabama aims to boost jobs, economies through downtowns across the state (al.com)

The president of Main Street Alabama said the organization may be seen as a “downtown revitalization” entity, but it’s really an economic development outfit.

Speaking to the Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham at its annual meeting at the McWane Science Center Wednesday, Helmer said Main Street Alabama uses tools like design, marketing, historic preservation and education but the real goal is to add jobs and grow the economies of downtowns and communities.

For instance, historic preservation alone is not enough, she said.

“Having an empty building is bad,” Helmer said. “Having a pretty empty building is still bad.”

Main Street Alabama uses its four-point approach to help communities with organization, promotion, design and economic restructuring. A tiered process can give communities initial training, progress to creating a downtown network and then onto becoming a designated Main Street.

Why all of the emphasis on downtowns?

Whether they are in large cities or small towns, downtown areas often account for 30 percent of jobs and up to 40 percent of the tax base of a community, Helmer said.

Nurturing businesses to start or grow downtown, therefore, can become long-term successes.

Working with entrepreneurs is one area Main Street Alabama helps communities, she said.

“Entrepreneurs are passionate about what they do,” Helmer said. “In my experience, entrepreneurs almost never have business experience and they never have money.”

Main Street can help those entrepreneurs in areas where they may be lacking so they can put the passion to work for themselves and their community, she said.

Downtowns can't usually count on major economic development projects like a Mercedes-Benz auto plant or an Airbus jet factory, but they can get the small businesses that can be just as vital, Helmer said.

"We all like the homeruns," she said. "But what really makes a community grow are the singles, the doubles and the triples."