



Office of Senate President Pro Tempore Del Marsh
Press Clips
Friday, April 30, 2010

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[State lawmakers hope to debate revolving door bill \(AP\)](#)

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) – Alabama legislators are returning to Montgomery after last week’s meeting schedule got interrupted by the winter storm.

Both the Senate and the House get back to work Tuesday afternoon.

Alabama Senate leaders hope to vote on a proposal to ban legislators from becoming lobbyists for two years after they leave office. A loophole in current law allows lawmakers to resign and immediately lobby the chamber opposite where they served.

Some Republicans are pushing the bill after several GOP lawmakers resigned last year.

House Republicans will hold a noon press conference on an effort to allow high school students to enroll in job-training classes at two-year colleges.

Outside the Statehouse, a coalition of groups will hold a noon rally to call for new regulations on payday loans.

[Week ahead: Put up or shut up time for candidates, closing the State House revolving door \(al.com\)](#)

MONTGOMERY, Alabama --- Decision time for candidates, three special elections and a catch-up week for legislators are political stories to watch this week.

Friday is the deadline for Democrats and Republicans to qualify with their parties to run in the June 3 primary. Governor, lieutenant governor, 140 legislative seats and many other races will be on the ballot.

On Tuesday, special elections will fill three seats in the Alabama House of Representatives vacated by resignations last year. The elections are in District 31 (Elmore and Coosa counties), District 53

(Jefferson County) and District 104 (Mobile County). Gov. Robert Bentley postponed the elections for a week because of the winter storm.

As for legislative business, the House returns at 1 p.m. Tuesday and the Senate at 2 p.m. The House met just one day last week because of the snow and ice storm. The Senate mustered quorums for two meeting days. But the usually busy committee day on Wednesday was scrapped.

This week, the Senate is expected to take up sunset bills, which are measures to review state agencies and are usually noncontroversial.

Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh, R-Anniston, said other priorities for the Senate would be his bill to close the revolving door on ex-legislators lobbying in the State House, SB 36, and the "Taxpayers' Bill of Rights," HB 105. That bill, by Rep. Paul DeMarco, R-Homewood, would create the Alabama Tax Appeals Commission to hear taxpayers' disputes with the state Department of Revenue. The House already passed it.

Last week, the Senate discussed briefly but delayed action on several bills, including SB 168 by Sen. Vivian Figures, D-Mobile, which would ban smoking in public places and workplaces. That bill could return to the Senate floor this week.

The House returns at 1 p.m. Tuesday. House Speaker Mike Hubbard, R-Auburn, said priorities this week would include Marsh's revolving door bill if it clears the Senate and a bill to expand the use of dual enrollment, which allows high school students to take classes at community colleges.

State Lawmakers Hope To Utilize Rarely-Used Constitutional Power To Amend U.S. Constitution (WHNT)

For decades, Republican lawmakers have touted a Balanced Budget Amendment as a way to rid the nation of its ever-growing debt.

However, those Congressional Republicans failed time and time again to pass the amendment with the required 2/3 majority vote in both the House and the Senate.

Now, state lawmakers are taking things into their own hands using a little-known, and rarely used power granted them by the Constitution.

It's called the Article V Constitutional Convention, called by 2/3 of the nation's states – currently 34 states are needed.

"George Mason put it in there to give states a means of amending the U.S. Constitution outside the control of Congress," said State Senator Arthur Orr, who is among the lawmakers leading the effort in Alabama.

Currently 33 states, including Alabama, are part of the effort to amend the Constitution to require America to run on a balanced budget.

"But that is a long way off in the future," said Orr. "What we can do now is prepare ourselves in case a constitutional convention is ever called."

In preparation for that event lawmakers proposed two bills.

The first details how delegates for the convention would be chosen and the requirements they must meet.

"They do not have to be a member of the legislature to be a delegate to the Constitutional Convention, but they will be chosen by the legislature," explained Orr.

The second bill puts controls in place, to prevent delegates from going rogue, and voting against the state's mandate.

"They can be criminally liable, and charged with a Class A Misdemeanor, if they breach the trust of the citizens by voting contrary to the state," said Orr.

Even if these bills do pass, Orr says there is a long road ahead, now his focus is on laying the groundwork.

"We're just in the first step, and again it'd be a very, very long journey to see this come to fruition, but if the pressure on Washington builds I would call that a success."

Thirty-eight states would be needed to ratify the Balanced Budget Amendment if the convention is called.

Despite coming close twice in the 1960s, and again in the 1980s, state legislatures have never successfully called an Article V Constitutional Convention.

Shay Shelnett announces run for state senate seat (Trussville Tribune)

Trussville businessman Shay Shelnett announced Monday that he has qualified to run for the District 17 state senate seat which covers a portion of three central Alabama counties, Jefferson, Blount & St. Clair. The office is being vacated by Scott Beason who said last week that he would not seek re-election. Shelnett will run as a Republican.

Shelnett grew up in Pinson and is a graduate of Pinson Valley High School. He attended the University of Montevallo on academic and golf scholarships where he earned Academic All-American honors before graduating with a degree in business finance. He also earned a Masters of Education in math.

As former teacher and coach, Shelnett spent 10 years at Clay-Chalkville High School and Oneonta High School. He has also taught classes Jefferson State Community College. He has been involved in real estate and business development since 2006.

Shelnett and his family are active members of Palmerdale United Methodist Church. He is married to Paige Harwell Shelnett and has two daughters, Lexie and Lacie.

Gardendale mayor Phillips "prayerfully thinking" about running for State Senate seat being vacated by Beason (North Jefferson News)

GARDENDALE — Mayor Othell Phillips is mulling a run for the Alabama Senate.

Phillips said Monday that he is considering a run for the seat being vacated by Sen. Scott Beason, who announced Friday afternoon that he will not seek re-election.

"I have been bombarded with friends, family and current Alabama State Legislators (both in the House and Senate) encouraging me to enter the race for the Senate District 17 seat vacated by Senator Scott Beason," Phillips said in a Facebook message sent to The North Jefferson News. "I am currently prayerfully thinking and discussing the issue with my family. I will be spending the day in Montgomery tomorrow [Tuesday], and I hope to make a public decision on Wednesday."

Phillips was first elected mayor in 2008, and won a second term in 2012. In the past year, he and council president Stan Hogeland have spearheaded the effort to form a new city school system that will break away from the Jefferson County Schools, including the passage of the city's first-ever property tax to pay for the new system.

Sources: Parker Griffith Likely To Run For Governor (WHNT)

A one-time Democrat turned Republican turned Independent now appears to be plotting a run for governor...as a Democrat.

Multiple sources tell WHNT News 19 that former Congressman Parker Griffith is on the verge of announcing his candidacy for governor of Alabama, and as a member of the party he famously abandoned just four years ago. WHNT News 19 has confirmed that the Alabama Democratic Party recently voted to reinstate Griffith, clearing the way for a gubernatorial run that we're told will likely be announced before Friday's qualifying deadline.

Dr. Parker Griffith has run as a member of the Republican and Democratic parties in Alabama, serving in the Alabama Senate and also in the U.S. Congress from 2009-2011. Griffith was elected to Congress as a Democrat, but switched over to the Republican party halfway through his first term in office in 2010. Current Congressman Mo Brooks soundly defeated Griffith in the GOP primaries of 2010 and 2012, with Griffith eventually deciding to quit the GOP last year.

Griffith also said in an interview with WHNT News 19 last fall he was finished with both parties. He's also run for mayor of Huntsville.

Local Democratic sources said Griffith met with state Democratic party leaders in Montgomery this past weekend to discuss his candidacy. Griffith did not respond to our messages, and has yet to file any formal paperwork.

Madison County Democratic Party Chair Clete Wetli said Griffith has been welcomed back.

"If he's going to support the party platform then he's a Democrat as far as I'm concerned," said Wetli. "He's got some damage control to do. He's going to have to reach out and talk to people and explain why he's the best candidate for the job."

Griffith appears on the website AlabamaStrong.com, which states its mission is 'One Voice United for all Alabamians.' The website states Alabama Strong is a grass-roots movement that brings together the resilient people of Alabama.

"Alabama Strong is an effort to be another voice, in Alabama and nationally, of what we can do as an optimistic people," Griffith says in a video on the website.

"Not only is Alabama strong, but America is strong. We are the strongest country in the world... All of that craziness that we've heard for the last two or three years – we're going to ignore that. We're going to tell the real story of Alabama being strong and America being strong. Optimism is contagious."

The website doesn't state Griffith's role with Alabama Strong, nor does it say if he is seeking a particular office.

WHNT News 19 contacted Bronwen Murray, who interviews Griffith in the video. Murray said Griffith is contemplating an announcement later in the week.

The website states Alabama Strong seeks to focus on tough issues including education reform, healthcare reform, immigration reform and prison reform.

Qualifying Deadline Nears

This Friday, February 7, is the last day for candidates to qualify with the parties for local and state office in Alabama.

One other Democrat has declared he will run for governor, Kevin Bass. Bass, a businessman, lives in Fayette and is a former minor league baseball player.

Two candidates have qualified to run as Republicans – Robert Bentley, the incumbent, and Stacey Lee George, a former Morgan County Commissioner.

The Alabama primaries are June 3.

Folsom not running again for Alabama lieutenant governor (AP)

Former Lt. Gov. Jim Folsom Jr. said Monday that he's not planning to run for lieutenant governor even though he filed paperwork creating a campaign committee for this year's race.

Folsom's longtime campaign chairman, Montgomery attorney Peck Fox, filed the paperwork with the secretary of state Friday. Folsom and Fox said the filing was required by Alabama's new campaign finance law because Folsom has \$2,002 left in his campaign account from the 2010 election.

"I don't have any plans to run. That was strictly a compliance measure," Folsom said in a phone interview.

Folsom said friends and supporters have been encouraging him to run again this year, and filing the paperwork prompted more calls. But a return to politics is not in his plans for now, he said.

Folsom lives in Cullman and operates an investment business in Birmingham. He was elected twice as lieutenant governor before moving up to governor in 1993 when Gov. Guy Hunt was convicted of an ethics violation and removed from office. Folsom lost a bid for a full term in 1994 and left politics for several years before returning in 2006 to win the lieutenant governor's office again. He lost his re-election bid in 2010 to Republican Kay Ivey.

The deadline for Democratic and Republican candidates to sign up for this year's race for lieutenant governor is Friday.

Ivey is running again and is opposed in the Republican primary June 3 by Jefferson County minister Stan Cooke.

Former state Rep. James Fields of Cullman is seeking the Democratic nomination. Like Folsom, he was one of many Democrats defeated in 2010 when Republican candidates swept all three branches of state government.

Federal judge says he'll rule quickly on whether to dismiss Alabama Accountability Act lawsuit (AP)

MONTGOMERY, Alabama — A federal judge says he will rule quickly on whether to throw out a lawsuit challenging Alabama's new tax credits for families that move their children from failing public schools.

U.S. District Judge Keith Watkins heard about an hour of arguments Monday on a request from state officials to dismiss the lawsuit filed by the Montgomery-based Southern Poverty Law Center on behalf of eight low-income children living in four counties in central and south Alabama.

Southern Poverty Law Center attorney Jerri Katzerman said some rural students don't have the income or transportation to move to non-failing schools because they live too far away or the schools won't accept new students. "The statute operates to deny them access to a non-failing education," she said.

Assistant Attorney General Will Parker told the judge that the state officials sued by the law center aren't denying anyone the right to transfer. "The act is an even-handed measure with respect to children in failing schools," he said.

The judge said he will rule "pretty quickly" on whether to dismiss the suit or let it proceed to trial.

The state teachers' organization, the Alabama Education Association, has filed a separate suit in state court challenging the law. A Montgomery judge will hear arguments Thursday on a request by state officials to dismiss that suit.

The private-school tax credits are part of the Alabama Accountability Act passed by the Legislature last February. The law allows parents with children in public schools rated as failing by the state Department of Education to move them to a non-failing public school in the same district or another district.

They can also move them to a private school that is participating in the program. The parents can qualify for a tax credit of about \$3,500 annually to help pay the costs of the move.

In the fall, 78 public schools were rated as failing. Alabama had 719 students transfer to non-failing public schools within their school system, 18 move to public schools in other school systems, and 52 move to private schools.

Katzerman told the judge that city and county school systems can refuse to accept any students from a nearby school system with failing schools. She argued the law provides an incentive for them to do that because they don't want to accept students who might pull down a school's academic achievement and then get it on the failing schools list.

The judge said he has questions about that part of the law, as well as a part of the law that always classifies 6 percent of public schools as failing. He said Alabama could still have failing schools even if every school in Alabama performed above the national average.

The judge also questioned whether the courts should get involved. "Isn't this a policy decision the Legislature is entitled to make? I'm not a superintendent," he said.

He told Katzerman that if he should block the law, he might not be helping her clients get a better education. "That leaves your students exactly where they are now," he said

[Resort's offer to heroic Birmingham-area teachers sparks debate over ethics \(al.com\)](#)

When David Clark, general manager of The Beach Club in Gulf Shores, offered a total of 50 two-night condo stays to Birmingham-area teachers who spent the night with their students in the schools during last week's winter storm, he had no idea that the gifts may violate the state's ethics law.

"If it is, we certainly don't want to do anything to harm teachers or anyone else," Clark said Monday morning. "I had no idea this could be a potential problem."

Clark had contacted state Sen. Trip Pittman, R-Daphne, on Monday morning. Pittman referred him to the Alabama Ethics Commission.

"I don't want to put any teachers in a compromising position," Clark said. "I hope to hear from the Ethics Commission very soon."

Meanwhile, Hugh Evans, general counsel for the Alabama Ethics Commission, told AL.com that he is "comfortable with the way they (The Beach Club) are doing this."

In a story about The Beach Club's offer that was published Sunday morning on AL.com, Clark said that the first 25 teachers nominated for the contest had already been selected, but that because of the large number of emails he had received, his company, Spectrum Resorts, had decided to reward 25 additional teachers with two-night stays.

Soon after the story was published, a commenter raised the issue of whether it would be an ethics violation for teachers to accept the offer. In 2012, the Alabama Legislature passed an amendment to

the statewide ethics law limiting teacher gifts from an individual to \$25, not to exceed \$50 in a calendar year.

Until Clark saw that comment, he said, he'd never considered that offering the two-night stays could violate any law. "We were just trying to recognize teachers who went way beyond to do great things," he said.

"My knowledge of the ethics law really only grew yesterday," he added. "I appreciate someone asking the questions. I hadn't thought about it, and I certainly wouldn't want any teachers to lose their jobs."

Clark, like many others who commented on the story on AL.com, said that his interpretation of the law is that it is intended to prevent parents from influencing students' grades. "I don't see how a company 300 miles away can influence a grade," he said.

One AL.com commenter replied to the initial question about an ethics violation by writing, "There was no reward incentive in staying with their students. Are you one of those people who would have to be given a reward to stay and do the right thing?"

Sen. Cam Ward, R-Alabaster, the chairman of the Alabama Senate Judiciary Committee, told an AL.com reporter on Sunday that he would defer to the Ethics Commission on the matter. But on his Facebook page, he wrote that he and his wife "actually nominated some of our local teachers for this honor.... I do not think the rule should apply to teachers in this case."

Meanwhile, Clark and the Spectrum Resorts marketing department are tasked with reading some 500 emails telling the stories of teachers around Birmingham who stayed at their schools, feeding, comforting and entertaining the students who were stranded there.

Of those submissions, 25 teachers will receive two-night stays at The Beach Club. "What a wonderful thing to have the opportunity to do," said Clark of reading all the stories.

As of Monday morning, Clark continued to receive emails, even though the deadline was supposed to be 8 p.m. Sunday.

Ashley Cobb Spencer, a teacher from Christ's Kids Preschool in Hoover, wrote on The Beach Club's Facebook page, "A handful of teachers stayed to love on and care for the kids who remained, and the same teachers comforted moms as best they could who were heartbroken they wouldn't get to snuggle their babies at bedtime that night..."

"Elementary kids may have been easier to handle than breast-fed babies with no mommas.... Beach towels don't equal comfy bedding and Cheez-Its don't fill up hungry bellies but by the grace of God, our children were comfy and full with the love of our caring staff!"

Many people heaped praise on The Beach Club for rewarding teachers through the promotion. "Love this idea! What a wonderful thing to do for very deserving educators!" wrote Cia Stewart Tompkins.

"Thank you for giving back to our teachers who are often forgotten," wrote LaMecha Bush Chamblin.

Winners will be announced Wednesday, Feb. 5, on the resort's Facebook page, said Clark, "pending advice from the Ethics Commission."

AARP Alabama against bill abolishing PSC's phone complaint process (Montgomery Advertiser)

A bill passed out of a House committee last month has raised alarms for AARP Alabama, which says the legislation could prevent seniors from bringing disputes with their phone company to the Public Service Commission.

The bill's sponsor calls it the last step in the state's ongoing deregulation of the telecommunications industry.

Sponsored by Rep. Mike Hill, R-Columbiana, the legislation would eliminate the PSC's power to hear complaints from customers over inaccurate billing, services not ordered by a customer, or "the establishment or disruption of telecommunications service." The PSC is limited in those situations to enforcing terms and conditions of contracts or enforcing Federal Communications Commission regulations on billing.

The PSC's Consumer Services Section handled 831 complaints against telecommunication companies in 2013; according to the PSC, 417 of those involved AT&T.

Hill said Monday that with telecommunications companies moving into the state since deregulation, AT&T, which once dominated Alabama, had seen its market share fall significantly.

"There's no longer any advantage to being AT&T," he said. "They can't tell every customer that calls, go jump in a lake. They have to answer their calls."

Hill said that the PSC complaint process was needed when the company was a regulated monopoly in the state. Now, he said, customers unhappy with their service can move to another carrier.

AARP, however, sees it differently. Jamie Harding, the group's associate director for communications, said that while competition overall has increased, older people in rural areas still rely on landlines offered by AT&T.

"That landline comes from AT&T, and it only comes from AT&T," she said.

Harding also said the group was concerned that older individuals would be unlikely to adapt to cellphone technology. Without a process in place, she said, AARP was concerned that older individuals could fall victim to the whim of the company.

"The landline is relatively inexpensive at this point," she said. "Again, without oversight, there's no consumer protection."

Harding said AARP planned to contact the PSC with its concerns. The PSC lost most of its regulatory powers over the state's telecommunications industry in 2005, and members of the PSC and their staff Monday said they would defer to the Legislature on the question.

"We are a legislative entity," Commissioner Jeremy Oden said. "We have to depend on what the Legislature does."

Attempts to reach PSC president Twinkle Andress Cavanaugh for comment Monday were unsuccessful. David Rountree, chief of staff for Commissioner Terry Dunn, said Dunn would wait on the lawmakers' decision, though he hoped to see language that would give customers a strong voice should the complaint process revert back to the company.

[Leeds council votes to pay towing costs, residents voice support for quick action in snow and ice \(al.com\)](#)

Faced with impassable roads lined with cars left in the snow, Leeds city officials last week decided to tow 37 or so vehicles at the owners' expense -- a move that prompted a public backlash on social media almost as furious as the unexpected freeze that brought central Alabama to a halt.

The Leeds City Council voted tonight to "ratify emergency actions taken by the mayor," a move Mayor David Miller said will allow the city to pay those towing costs.

"It was either tow cars out of the way or not tow cars out of the way and not open an access road, the only access road to our shelters," Miller told reporters before the start of the meeting. "We made the option to favor people instead of cars, as a result we were able to take 300 plus people to various shelters around town and get them out of subfreezing weather."

Miller said he has been told by Alabama Department of Transportation officials that ALDOT will reimburse the city for that cost. ALDOT engineer Brian Davis said any towed on U.S. 78 will be reimbursed because it helped the state clear traffic on I-20.

After the vote, several Leeds residents spoke out in favor of the action. However, one man whose vehicle was towed, Jimmy Cleckler, called for Miller to resign.

Leeds resident Deanna Frankowski said city leaders made the right decision. "People need to be a little more prepared. Government is not always the answer," Frankowski said.

"The city did what was best for the majority," said Leeds resident Bill Edgil. "Three hundred plus people were brought to heat, a warm meal, back home, and not left on the side of the highway."

"I think the mayor and council did a wonderful job under awful circumstances," said Leeds resident Lee Barnes.

Leeds Schools Superintendent John Moore said the entire community rallied together in the storm, noting Rusty's Bar-B-Q fed the 15 teachers and 11 students stranded at the city's elementary and middle schools. "They wouldn't take a penny," Moore said.

After the vote, Miller provided point-by-point answers to the questions he said he anticipated hearing during the public comments portion of the meeting:

Why were the cars impounded?

Miller: Impounding cars is a standard procedure to protect vehicles from theft, vandalism, or being struck by another vehicle and to make sure they are turned over to rightful owners.

Why not just move them to the side of the road?

Miller: "That's a great idea when you can do it ... There wasn't any side of the road" only a ditch and a ravine.

The governor said people did not have to worry about cars being towed. So, why were they in Leeds?

Miller: The governor was referring to interstates and state-maintained highways. Miller said he believed the governor would have wanted the city to move the cars in the interest of public safety.

Why weren't the cars on I-20 towed?

Miller: Leeds did not have the equipment or manpower and the state is responsible for the interstate. Leeds Police Sgt. Loebler, however, did take a HUMVEE to carry a child who recently received a bone marrow transplant from I-20 to get his anti-rejection medicine.

Mayors of Moody and Irondale contradicted statements you made saying those cities would also tow cars. Why the discrepancy?

Miller called both mayors "honorable" men and said they weren't faced with the same emergency situation as Leeds.

Why did you state the law prohibits public funds from being used to benefit private citizens?

Miller said he stands by that but, after conferring with State Sen. Slade Blackwell and State Rep. Dickie Drake, the city received a legal opinion stating the funds could be used if it was ratified as an emergency action.

Do you receive kickbacks from the towing and are you related to an owner of Ryan Automotive (which performed some of the towing)?

Miller said his father late in life married Hunter Ryan's great-grandmother. The contract between the city and Ryan's predates his administration, Miller said. "The city gets zero money from wrecker calls," Miller said. "If he (Hunter Ryan) was my son" I would have done the same thing, Miller said.

Why were the towing fees so expensive?

Miller: The risk and amount of effort to move the vehicles were the reason for the costs. Miller said the prices were comparable to other wrecker services. Two city vehicles and a truck from Murray Automotive were damaged in wrecks on icy roads. A wrecker belonging to Ryan Automotive was damaged when someone poured a "corrosive liquid" into its gas tank, destroying the engine.

Why did the governor's office refute your statement that the state would reimburse the costs of towing?

"My wording maybe wasn't the best," Miller said. "It was my fault for making it sound like the state was going to write a check." Miller said. Blackwell and Drake, he said, were trying to find a way for the state to help.

In the end, Miller said he believed the city acted in the best interest of the public.

"Was this operation perfect? Certainly not," Miller said. "The city acted quickly and correctly."

[Jimmy Collier, Mike Holmes square off in special election in Alabama House District 31 \(al.com\)](#)

Two Republicans square off in a special election runoff for District 31 in the Alabama House of Representatives on Tuesday.

Wetumpka car dealer Jimmy Collier faces retiree and timber farmer Mike Holmes. The race was scheduled for Jan. 28, but Gov. Robert Bentley postponed it because of the winter storm.

The winner will complete the term of Rep. Barry Mask, R-Wetumpka, who resigned last year to become executive director of the Alabama Association of Realtors.

This is the last year of Mask's term, so the seat will be up for election again in the June 3 primary.

Holmes ran first and Collier finished second in a four-candidate field Dec. 3.

No Democrats ran for the seat.

[Volkswagen's union vote set for next week; outcome could be key for Alabama's auto industry \(al.com\)](#)

A vote has been set for next week on whether the United Auto Workers union will represent employees at the Volkswagen plant in Tennessee.

It's an event that's being watched closely by people across the South's auto sector, particularly those in Alabama.

If the UAW prevails, it would mark a dramatic shift for the region, which is dominated by foreign-owned factories that are non-union.

The UAW also has a campaign underway at Tuscaloosa County's Mercedes-Benz plant.

While that campaign is smaller than the one at Volkswagen, it could get more attention from the UAW if next week's vote is successful, said Dennis Cuneo, a former Toyota executive turned site selection consultant who spoke today at the Economic Development Association of Alabama Winter Conference that's being held in Hoover.

"I think if the UAW is successful there, they gain momentum. My guess is the next step would be Mercedes," he said.

Likewise, if the union fails at Volkswagen, that's a setback that also will likely be felt in Alabama and elsewhere, Cuneo said.

"Whatever occurs, it's significant," he said.

Cuneo listed the UAW's increasing focus on the South as one of several challenges for the auto industry in Alabama.

Economic developers often tout the lack of a large union presence in the state's auto industry when recruiting new companies. But if the UAW advances, that's not going to work anymore, Cuneo said.

While Alabama is an automotive powerhouse -- producing more than 915,000 vehicles last year compared to none 20 years ago -- it also faces growing competition from Mexico for new plants and additional production capacity, he said.

Meanwhile, there are still opportunities on the table, including deepening its supplier base and landing projects tied to new automotive technologies, Cuneo said.

Workers who support the UAW efforts at Mercedes cite the plant's increasing use of temporary workers, safety concerns due to injuries and the lack of a voice in other workplace issues.

UAW President Bob King said today that the union could not aim for certification by Volkswagen (without a vote) due to sabotage by "right-wing" anti-union forces.

The UAW said later that the election has been set for Feb. 12 to 14. The National Labor Relations Board set the election after an agreement was reached between Volkswagen Group of America and the UAW.

The vote will decide whether the union can establish a German-style works council at the Chattanooga plant. Such panels include both members of management and the rank-and-file.

Last fall, the UAW said a majority of Volkswagen workers had signed cards favoring the union's representation in creating a works council at the plant.

[Snow and ice sink January's U.S. auto sales; slight gains for Alabama-built models \(al.com\)](#)

Harsh winter weather across the country put a chill on January's U.S. auto sales.

Automaker reports issued today showed total sales of light vehicles sank 3 percent from a year ago, to 1.01 million, according to Autodata Corp.

But combined sales of the eight models produced in Alabama for the U.S. market rose slightly, up 1.4 percent from January 2013.

Strong performances by the Acura MDX (+65 percent), Hyundai Elantra (+26 percent) and Honda Odyssey (+16.6 percent) helped offset big tumbles by the Hyundai Sonata (-26 percent), Mercedes-Benz GL-Class (-23.5 percent) and Honda Pilot (-16 percent).

Analysts blamed the deep freeze that stretched across the U.S. last month for the poor showing. 2013 was the industry's best year since 2007, with total sales of 15.6 million; the total is expected to top 16 million this year.

Most major automakers reported declines in their overall sales for January, including Volkswagen (-14 percent), General Motors (-12 percent), Ford (-7.5 percent), Toyota (-7 percent), Honda (-2 percent).

Exceptions were Nissan, with sales that rose 12 percent, Chrysler (+8 percent) and Mercedes (+1.3 percent). Hyundai's sales were flat.

Byrne wants more “reasonable red snapper season” (Fox 10)

Alabama Congressman Bradley Byrne says he wants to explore new ways to develop what he calls, a more reasonable red snapper season in the Gulf of Mexico.

<https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/6501987/Byrne%20interview%20complete.mp3>

Byrne is taking part in a hearing to reform federal rules on fishing on Tuesday, February 4, 2014. He said currently, the Science and Statistical Committee of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council places severe limits on the red snapper catch, affecting both recreational fishermen and charter boat captains. While local hearings have been held on the issue, little has really changed.

FOX10 News anchor Bob Grip asked the congressman if the federal estimates on the snapper population are based on bad science.

Byrne said, “Bad science is at the root of it, and the question is, can you get good science from the present committee? Do we do away with that committee and depend on these regional councils, because there are not just fishermen like you and me, but there are marine scientists like Dr. Bob Shipp locally, who will tell you that we’ve got plenty of snapper in the Gulf of Mexico”.

In referring to the Committee, Byrne continued, “They’re not listening to the citizens that they’re supposed to be serving”.

Byrne said he supports a proposal which would allow Alabama to control its waters up to a distance of 9 miles from shore.

Tea Party Class More Confrontational Than Ever (Roll Call)

The atmospheric offered plenty of clues, but the numbers don’t lie: The House was an even more polarized and partisan place last year than it was when the tea party class of Republicans took over

the place two years before. And that's in part because those lawmakers have grown even more antagonistic to President Barack Obama's agenda — and even more willing to toe the party line.

That is among the central takeaways from CQ Roll Call's analysis of 2013 congressional voting patterns, the latest installment in an annual study that began six decades ago.

While Obama got his way on 57 percent of the congressional votes on which he staked a position, a fifth-year success rate exceeded only by George W. Bush among the past four re-elected presidents, that was almost entirely because of a record amount of support from his Democratic colleagues running the Senate.

In the House, Obama had his way on just 21 percent of the votes he clearly cared about, and that was because the average member of the Republican majority voted his way only 12 percent of the time, the smallest measure of presidential support any caucus has ever recorded for a Democratic president.

Twelve percent was also the exact amount of support Obama received from the 65 members who remain from the Class of 2010. (Eighty GOP members who had never before served in Congress were elected that year.) But it's notable that the median went down a whopping 9 points since 2011, the first year those lawmakers were in Washington.

In other words, the group who voted against Obama 4 out of 5 times as brand-new freshmen disagreed with him 7 out of 8 times as first-year sophomores. The substance of the votes taken over the two years was different, so I can't make a precise apples-to-apples comparison. But the trend would seem to contradict a conventional wisdom about the modern Congress: Even those who arrive with the most revolutionary fervor tend to buff away some of their roughest ideological edges after a couple of years.

In fact, 30 of those elected in the tea party wave saw their presidential support scores decline by more than 10 points from 2011 to 2013, suggesting that many have concluded they are safe in shifting their voting patterns further to the right now that they have secured their first re-election.

The steepest plunges belonged to a pair of the bigger upset winners of 2010: Ohio's Bill Johnson backed Obama just 9 percent of the time last year, down 17 points from his first year in office; the drop by North Carolina's Renee Ellmers was 16 points.

By contrast, only two members of that class backed Obama more often in 2013 than in 2011. The scores edged up only a few points for both the iconoclastic Justin Amash of Michigan and the

electorally imperiled Chris Gibson of New York. (Rothenberg Political Report/Roll Call rates his race, in territory Obama carried in 2012, as Tilts Republican.)

The significant drop-off in support for Obama among the Class of 2010 is echoed, if far less dramatically, in CQ Roll Call's studies of party unity — how often members stick with the bulk of their caucus on roll calls in which a majority of Republicans are on one side and a majority of Democrats are on the other. (Thanks for number-crunching help are due at this point to vote studies major domo John Cranford and researchers Ryan Kelly and Jay Hunter.)

People with an eye on the Capitol every day won't be surprised to learn that 69 percent of all the 2013 votes in Congress fell mostly along party lines, a number exceeded less than a handful of times since the start of the Eisenhower administration. But, at a time when it often appeared that Speaker John A. Boehner was struggling to hold his troops together, the average House Republican stayed in the fold on 92 percent of those votes — a record level of party unity for that caucus. The number of times the group was unanimous also was in record territory, another reflection of how GOP leaders put a priority on proposals that would unify the troops.

And sophomores were among the most likely to back their party. Their median party unity score was 96 percent, an increase from their 94.5 percent average during the group's first year in office.

Five of them supported Obama often enough and strayed from the party line often enough to make those Top 10 lists: Amash, Gibson, New Yorkers Richard Hanna and Michael G. Grimm, and the retiring-after-just-two-terms Jon Runyan of New Jersey.

Still, the takeaway about the Class of 2010 is tough to dispute: They have become a bit more partisan and markedly more confrontational since the first year they had voting cards. Given that the numbers are pushing close to the statistical extremes, these are trends that will be tough to continue, but are sure to bedevil Boehner and Obama in the meantime.

[ObamaCare network vulnerable to cyber attack \(Fox News\)](#)

U.S. intelligence agencies last week urged the Obama administration to check its new health care network for malicious software after learning that developers linked to the Belarus government helped produce the website, raising fresh concerns that private data posted by millions of Americans will be compromised.

The intelligence agencies notified the Department of Health and Human Services, the agency in charge of the HealthCare.gov network, about their concerns.

Specifically, officials warned that programmers in Belarus, a former Soviet republic closely allied with Russia, were suspected of inserting malicious code that could be used for cyber attacks, according to U.S. officials familiar with the concerns.

The software links the millions of Americans who signed up for ObamaCare to the federal government and more than 300 medical institutions and health care providers.

"The U.S. Affordable Care Act software was written in part in Belarus by software developers under state control, and that makes the software a potential target for cyber attacks," one official said.

Cybersecurity officials said the potential threat to the U.S. health care data is compounded by what they said was an Internet data "hijacking" last year involving Belarusian state-controlled networks. The month-long diversion covertly re-routed massive amounts of U.S. Internet traffic to Belarus -- a repressive dictatorship located between Russia, Poland and Ukraine.

The combination of the Belarus-origin software, the Internet re-routing, and the anti-U.S. posture of the Belarusian government "makes the software written in Belarus a potential target of cyber attacks for identity theft and privacy violations" of Americans, the official said.

Security officials urged HHS to immediately conduct inspections of the network software for malicious code.

The software currently is used in all medical facilities and insurance companies in the United States.

The officials also recommended that HHS use security specialists not related to software vendors for the inspections to reduce further risks.

Officials disclosed the potential software compromise last week after the discovery in early January of statements by Belarusian official Valery Tsepkalo, director of the government-backed High-Technology Park (HTP) in Minsk.

Tsepkalo told a Russian radio station in an interview broadcast last summer that HHS is "one of our clients," and that "we are helping Obama complete his insurance reform.