



Office of Senate President Pro Tempore Del Marsh
Press Clips
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Sen. Scott Beason says pistol bill 'still has a chance,' but no guarantee that support is there (al.com)

MONTGOMERY, Alabama --- Sen. Scott Beason said tonight he has not given up hope for passing his bill to allow people to carry a loaded pistol in their vehicles without a permit.

The Senate debated the bill for several hours today but adjourned without voting on it after a petition to end a filibuster fell three votes short.

Beason said he hoped for a vote on the bill when the Senate returns on Tuesday, "but I have no assurance of that."

"I do believe it still has a chance," he said.

Sen. Rodger Smitherman, D-Birmingham led the filibuster today. Smitherman strongly opposed legislation affecting the Birmingham Water Works Board that passed on Tuesday and indicated he would slow legislation in the Senate as a result.

Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh said the Republican senators would meet Tuesday before the Senate convenes at 2 p.m. and decide whether there is enough support to bring the bill, SB 354, back to the floor.

Lawmakers are running out of time to pass other legislation, including the two state budgets, and might be reluctant to allow another long debate on the gun bill. Only six meeting days remain in the session.

It takes 21 votes in the 35-member Senate to stop debate. Eighteen senators voted to do so today.

The bill also faces the opposition of the Alabama Sheriffs' Association, although Jefferson County Sheriff Mike Hale supports it.

Besides the question of whether there is enough support for the bill, another is the effect of an amendment added today.

Beason said he thought the amendment, by Sen. Phil Williams of Rainbow City, hurt the bill. The amendment said:

"Nothing in this act shall serve to repeal existing revenues or license fees upon which any governmental or law enforcement entity currently relies."

Williams said that without the amendment, the bill would cause counties to lose revenue from concealed carry pistol permit fees because fewer people would buy permits. The Sheriffs' Association made the same argument.

Asked whether the amendment would undo the intent of his bill, Beason said he was not sure.

"You have to ask an attorney," Beason said.

Williams, who is an attorney, said he thought the effect of his bill would be to maintain the current requirements in the law. Williams said the revenues support law enforcement and school security.

Beason said he was not sure his bill would cause a loss of revenue. He said experiences in other states vary.

Beason said most southern states already allow loaded pistols in vehicles without permits. Alabama law requires pistols in vehicles to be unloaded and locked away out of reach if the owner does not have a permit.

Beason said people should be able to have usable guns for protection in their cars, just as they can in their homes. He proposed eliminating the permit requirement in a bill last year, but it was taken out of the final version that became law.

Gun-in-car bill sputters, stalls in Senate (Montgomery Advertiser)

A bill allowing drivers to carry loaded pistols in their cars without a permit Thursday trapped the Alabama Senate in a crossfire between issues of gun rights and local revenue.

The legislation, sponsored by Sen. Scott Beason, R-Gardendale, would allow individuals to carry a pistol in their car without a concealed carry permit. Individuals also would be allowed to carry concealed weapons on their own property without a permit, and in the vehicles or on the property of others with permission.

"It puts us in line with other states across the South, the other states that do not require concealed weapons permits in the car," said Beason, who sponsored legislation last year that expanded the locations where guns could be carried.

However, the lengthy debate on the bill, which consumed nearly all of the five hours the Senate met Thursday afternoon, failed to get the bill out of the chamber.

Sen. Rodger Smitherman, D-Birmingham, who was angered Tuesday by passage of a bill to expand the membership of the Birmingham Water Works Board, filibustered Beason's bill, and a Republican attempt to invoke cloture fell short by three votes, with four Republican senators not voting and two — Sen. Paul Bussman, R-Cullman, and Sen. Bryan Taylor, R-Prattville — joining eight Democrats in voting no.

Members of the Republican caucus said concerns from the sheriffs' association over the impact of the bill, as well as attempts by both parties to block legislation on the Thursday agenda, led to the stalemate.

"Birmingham Water Works ego, gun rights ego," said Sen. Gerald Dial, R-Lineville, as he left the chamber Thursday. "Two ego days."

Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh, R-Anniston, said the Republican caucus would meet Tuesday to decide whether they had the votes for cloture and to advance the bill.

"When someone has a bill like that, I expect them to know whether they have the cloture votes, and I don't think Sen. Beason actually knew he didn't have it," Marsh said Thursday evening. "I was a bit surprised, but then I wasn't working the cloture vote, either."

Beason said after the Senate adjourned that he believed he had the votes on final passage.

"On cloture, there's all sorts people upset about different issues, and it came out on the floor today," he said.

The Alabama Sheriffs' Association strongly opposes Beason's legislation, saying it would decrease public safety and cut into local revenues from concealed carry permits, revenues that frequently support public safety agencies. Bobby Timmons of the Alabama Sheriffs' Association said police officers who pull over cars can check outstanding warrants but can't be certain if the driver of the car is carrying a gun.

Current law "won't tell me if you've got a gun or not, and whether you've got a permit or don't have a permit, but it makes me a little more comfortable approaching the car," he said.

Timmons also said the legislation could affect counties' ability to pay for law enforcement and school resource officers by cutting revenue from gun permits. The Senate approved an amendment by Sen. Phil Williams, R-Rainbow City, that would "preserve existing revenues or license fees upon which any governmental or law enforcement entity currently relies."

It was unclear what practical effect Williams' amendment would have. Williams, saying he was trying to preserve funding for school resource officers in his district, said it would mean "current and existing procedures are going to have to stay in place" for counties to collect revenue, but referred questions about the impact of the amendment on carrying pistols in automobiles to Beason. Beason said the amendment "does tremendous damage" to the bill, but could not say how it would affect the central thrust of the bill.

"You'll have to talk to an attorney about that," he said.

Taylor said he had concerns with "three or four" bills further down the Senate agenda, bills that he declined to name. The senator said he agreed with the spirit of Beason's law, but felt the revenue question needed to be fully addressed.

"We need to work on the bill and find some way to ensure we're not taking money away from law enforcement purposes," he said.

[Gov. Robert Bentley calls for up-or-down vote on teacher pay raise; veto options limited \(al.com\)](#)

MONTGOMERY, Alabama --- Gov. Robert Bentley today urged the Legislature to have an up-or-down vote on a bill to provide an election-year pay raise for education employees.

The governor, who said last week he would try to amend any budget plan that does not include a 2 percent pay raise, acknowledged to reporters that his options on using a veto to achieve the raise are limited.

The House Ways and Means Education Committee carried over the pay raise bill on Wednesday, which means it's not in position for a House vote.

While stalling that bill, the committee approved a \$5.9 billion budget that would not fund the pay raise and would give less to the Public Employees' Health Insurance Program than Bentley proposed.

The Legislature is not through with the budget. But budget chairmen in the House and Senate have said they don't think a pay raise is sustainable.

Bentley said today his budget proposal was sound. He said the economy has improved enough to provide the revenues to make his proposal work.

"I'm supporting our teachers on this issue and I'm going to continue to do that," Bentley said. "We had a fiscally responsible budget. We had the money available."

Last week, Bentley said on Twitter that if the Legislature passed a budget without the 2 percent raise and the PEEHIP funding he requested, he would send the budget back with an executive amendment.

But today he said that procedurally he can only attach such an amendment to a separate bill that arrives at his desk, not to the budget itself. With the bill stalled in committee, he might not get that chance.

Rep. Bill Poole of Tuscaloosa, the chairman of the House Ways and Means Education Committee, issued a statement today about Bentley's call for the pay raise.

Poole said there is not enough money to support the pay raise and the level of increase Bentley proposed for PEEHIP. The health insurance plan faces a \$220 million shortfall, about one-third of that as a result of mandates under the Affordable Care Act, officials have said.

Bentley's proposal called for a \$72 million increase for PEEHIP, according to the Legislative Fiscal Office. The budget approved by the House committee would increase PEEHIP by \$48 million.

"It is the responsibility of the legislature to pass a budget, and I would encourage the Governor to allow the legislature to address important policy issues related to the education budget without injecting election year politics," Poole said in the statement.

Bentley's proposed budget would spend \$92 million above a cap set by proration prevention law known as the rolling reserve act. The House committee's version of the budget would spend \$23 million more than the cap.

Alabama Senate bill would allow teachers to receive gifts for above and beyond service (al.com)

MONTGOMERY, Alabama --- A state senator is proposing to amend Alabama's ethics law to allow teachers and state employees to accept rewards for exemplary service from a third party without running afoul of the law.

Sen. Greg Reed, R-Jasper, said he proposed the bill after the owner of a Gulf Shores resort offered free lodging to Birmingham-area teachers as a reward for their dedication during the snow and ice story in January.

Many teachers spent the night at schools with stranded students.

Reeds's bill, SB 348, is on the Senate agenda for today.

Reed said he asked the Legislative Reference Service to draft a bill and then sought advice from the Ethics Commission and Attorney General's office.

He said the intent is to allow unsolicited rewards from a third party for job performance over and above normal.

It could apply to teachers and state employees but not elected officials.

Reed said the rewarded performance should be "something that no one would question, including the Ethics Commission, that this is dedication over and above expected service by the employee."

Reed plans to add an amendment from the Ethics Commission that would require third parties to notify the commission of any rewards. If the reward is worth \$250 or more, it would have to be authorized by a majority vote of the Ethics Commission.

In 2012, the Legislature amended the ethics law to restrict gifts to teachers to a value of \$25 or less.

Bill to consolidate examiner's office passes House (TimesDaily)

MONTGOMERY — Though a few Republicans spoke against it, Rep. Ed Henry's bill to put the state examiner of public accounts under the state auditor was approved by the Alabama House on Thursday.

The vote was 65-23. House Bill 350 now goes to the Senate.

The legislation was largely prompted by chief examiner Ron Jones' decision last year to promote an assistant examiner at the highest salary allowed for the job — \$240,000 a year.

A panel of lawmakers, including Henry, R-Hartselle, criticized Jones' decision, but lacked authority to overrule it. Jones, who is paid \$241,000 a year, stood by his decision. Henry's bill essentially transfers examiner's office oversight to the auditor's office.

State Code allows the examiner's office to operate differently than other agencies, including with regard to salary structure.

It is not clear exactly how much money Henry's bill would save.

"Most states have their auditing function under the state auditor, not a separate entity," Henry said Thursday.

Sen. Arthur Orr, R-Decatur, has asked the state personnel department to study how many upper managers the state has and how much they earn compared to their counterparts in Southeastern state government and the private sector.

[House passes payday lending database bill \(Montgomery Advertiser\)](#)

After two years of tireless attempts to regulate the payday loan industry, the Alabama House of Representatives passed a bill that would help enforce a \$500 loan maximum.

The legislation, sponsored by Rep. Patricia Todd, D-Birmingham, would mandate that the state Banking Department set up a centralized database to track loans in real-time. Two similar bills — one that addresses payday lending and one that addresses title loans — also are moving through the Senate and House, but those bills include provisions to cap interest rates.

State law doesn't allow anyone to have more than \$500 in payday loans at a time. But because there's no way to track the loans, people can go to different lenders and take out multiple loans.

Todd said the industry's high interest rates trap its customers in cycles of debt and force them to take out new loans to pay back existing ones. The industry, however, says it provides a service traditional lenders don't, and says high interest rates mirror the risk involved in the loans.

"The reality is if they don't have \$500 the day they went in to get the loan, the likelihood of them having \$500 14 days later is almost impossible," Todd said. "That's what we're trying to address."

The loans issued are short-term loans that typically last between 14 and 30 days. Payday lenders can charge up to 456 percent APR on the short-term loans, and title loan operators, governed separately under the state's Small Loan Act, can charge up to 300 percent APR.

Todd said her original bill, which included an interest rate cap, wouldn't have gone anywhere. But most of the industry didn't have a problem with the database.

"Hopefully within a year or two, we'll have real significant data to show us how many people use payday loans, how many get multiple loans (and) how long it takes to pay it off," Todd said.

Once they have data, it'll give the state information to move forward with other regulations. Todd said it's a good start.

Sen. Arthur Orr, R-Decatur, has introduced legislation that would establish a database and impose an effective 52.5 percent interest rate cap on payday loans by lengthening their payment terms from 10 to 31 days to four months. The bill is still pending in a Senate committee, and industry representatives said that extending the terms of the loans would effectively transform the business they do.

Rep. Rod Scott, D-Fairfield, has introduced legislation that would set up a central database and cap interest charged by title loan companies. The legislation was scheduled to be in the House Financial Services Committee Thursday morning, but Rep. Lesley Vance, R-Phenix City, had the bill carried over.

Advocates of reform and industry representatives were negotiating the legislation Thursday morning.

Vance said afterward the sticking point in negotiations was interest rates charged to the companies.

"We want them to get together," he said. "The committee's ready to act."

Thursday was the 24th day of the regular session, which can only run 30 days within a 105-day calendar period. Vance said it would be difficult to get the title loan bill in position for passage before the clock runs out.

Summary of action in Alabama Legislature (AP)

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — A summary of action in the Alabama Legislature on Thursday, the 24th meeting day of the regular session:

HOUSE:

- Approved a bill to create a state database to enforce an existing limit on how much people can borrow from payday lenders. Goes to Senate.
- Approved a bill to place the Department of Examiners of Public Accounts within the office of the state auditor and transfers the duties of the chief examiner to the state auditor. Goes to Senate
- Approved a bill to increase the statute of limitations from three to five years for certain felonies and specify that the statute of limitations for theft by deception and certain securities violations doesn't begin until after the discovery of the facts constituting the offense. Goes to Senate.

SENATE:

- Debated, but did not vote, on a bill to allow people without pistol permits to carry loaded pistols in their vehicles.

AGENDA:

House convenes at 1 p.m. Tuesday and Senate at 2 p.m

Help me stop the funding crisis in Alabama's courts (Opinion by Chief Justice Roy Moore)

By Chief Justice Roy Moore

In November 2012, I was returned to the office of Chief Justice of the Alabama Supreme Court. After an absence of ten years, I was immediately shocked by the dire situation we face with the budget of the Unified Judicial System of this State. We have lost 305 critical employees since 2001, and our budget from the General Fund has shrunk from \$120 million in 2001, when I was first elected Chief

Justice, to \$89 million in 2014. This has necessitated the closure of a majority of the circuit clerk's offices for one day a week to allow court specialists to complete needed filings and case processing. Another effect of inadequate funding is that cases are delayed and justice denied to thousands of victims, children, families, and businesses each year.

For the past two years many state employees have received salary increases and in 2014 all Executive Branch employees have been cleared to receive merit raises, while employees in the court system have not had a single merit raise or cost of living adjustment since 2008. While morale is low, we are blessed to have loyal and dedicated personnel who are willing to sacrifice because they truly care about the people of Alabama they serve. Their faithful service is something for which we can all be proud.

"Level Funding" is a term often used to indicate that an agency will receive the same amount of funding as they did the previous year. However, during the last three years the budget of the Unified Judicial System does not even receive enough money to pay for mandated costs and expenses which we have incurred!

chart.JPG

During the last ten years, the trial courts of this state have lost \$30 million from the "level funding" we should have received as shown in the accompanying chart. Adjusted for inflation, our loss in real terms is over \$73 million.

Nevertheless, the court system collects over \$500 million for businesses, child support, restitution for crime victims, and in 2013 contributed over \$97 million to Executive Branch agencies alone. Also, during the past two years our Drug Courts have saved over \$32 million in incarceration costs through the rehabilitation and reformation of the lives of young men and women addicted to drugs.

While our Juvenile Courts struggle to help children in need in schools across Alabama through truancy and other educational programs, there has been great resistance to transfer funds from the Education Trust Fund to help those children most in need. Additionally, our work with juvenile delinquency and neglected and abused children is being placed in jeopardy.

I call upon the citizens of this State to let your voices be heard by the Alabama Legislature and the Governor, as well as other elected officials, to restore the integrity and ability of the courts of Alabama to serve your needs. We seek an additional \$26 million this year to fulfil our constitutional duties to the citizens of Alabama. Your help will be greatly appreciated.

Overflowing Alabama prisons filled with drug offenders? It's largely a myth (al.com)

Forget about solving Alabama's chronic prison overcrowding by cutting loose all of the low-level drug offenders. For the most part, they are not in the penitentiary.

The state's worst-in-the-nation prison overcrowding has led Gov. Robert Bentley to call for the construction of new correctional institutions – at a time when some other states have found enough success reducing inmate populations that they have begun to close facilities.

Alabama's prisons are so stretched beyond capacity, though, that there are no easy targets. A favorite of the general public – drug users arrested for petty offenses – arises from a common misconception that drug offenders make up a majority or a large chunk of the inmate population.

Statistics from the Alabama Sentencing Commission, though, unequivocally show that is not true. While drug offenses do constitute the largest share of convictions – averaging about 41.5 percent of all convictions from fiscal year 2010 to fiscal year 2012 – narcotics offenders often do not go to prison and do not stay long when they do. That continual churn keeps that population relatively small.

Bennet Wright, the executive director of the Sentencing Commission, said various diversion programs designed to block some drug offenders from going to prison has been enough to keep the system treading water.

"There really is no silver bullet to solve the overcrowding problem," said Wright, whose state-created agency writes punishment guidelines that judges must consider. "The total of all efforts at reform that have been put in place really has been a stabilization."

The numbers

Drug offenders accounted for 36.6 percent of all new prison admissions from Oct. 1, 2009, to Sept. 30, 2012.

But few drug offenders spend much time in prison. The inmate population as of Sept. 5 – a snapshot from the most recent data available – included just 347 people whose most serious conviction was for first-degree possession of marijuana. That represents 1.4 percent of the inmates incarcerated that day.

Alabama eighth graders ranked dead last in national math scores as common core fight fades (al.com)

If anyone ever joked "thank God for Mississippi" when it comes to Alabama's public schools, they better check their facts -- at least when it comes to eighth grade math.

For the past two years, Mississippi has surpassed Alabama in eighth-grade math on the National Assessment of Education Progress, the largest and longest running assessment of U.S. education performance.

In fact, says Jeremy Zelkowski, a University of Alabama mathematics professor who trains middle and high school math teachers, Alabama is the lowest achieving state in the nation when it comes to eighth-grade math.

"We don't even have that funny joke that we hear from teachers: 'Thank God for Mississippi, because they're always below us,'" he said. "Well, that's not true for eighth grade mathematics anymore."

A supporter of the controversial Common Core State Standards Initiative, Zelkowski blames the low scores on low standards implemented in 2003, during the No Child Left Behind era.

He also thinks the national math and English standards known as the common core could lift Alabama's math scores out of the doldrums.

"The 2013 standards expect student know more than basic skills and facts. That's the big difference," he said this week.

Hoping to address the Senate Education Committee during a public hearing on whether to allow schools to opt out of the common core, Zelkowski assembled a host of NAEP data to demonstrate his point. The meeting ended before his turn to speak though.

According to Zelkowski's assessment, Alabama's average NAEP score for eighth-grade math students grew just 17 points from 1992 to 2013. That's less than the regional average for the South of 21 growth points.

Gov. Robert Bentley to hold ceremonial bill signing for new Alabama Workforce Council (Montgomery Advertiser)

TRINITY, Alabama – Gov. Robert Bentley will be in north Alabama on Friday morning for a ceremonial signing of SB 217, a bill that creates the new Alabama Workforce Council.

Sponsored by Sen. Paul Bussman, R-Cullman, and Rep. Terri Collins, R-Decatur, the bill establishes a council of governor-appointed business executives and industry leaders who will assist state officials on issues related to workforce development.

A release said the governor's new College and Career Ready Task Force recommended the creation of the Alabama Workforce Council, which will help create policies, develop education workforce programming and talk about critical workforce development issues.

State and local leaders, as well as the College and Career Ready Task Force, will be in attendance at the bill signing at 10 a.m. Friday at Nucor Corporation on 4301 Iverson Boulevard in Trinity.

Ala. Republicans replace candidate in Senate 6 (AP)

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (AP) — The Alabama Republican Party has changed its candidate in a state Senate race in northwest Alabama.

Republican Party Chairman Bill Armistead says Jerry Mays dropped out of the Senate District 6 race, and the party's Candidate Committee replaced him with Tusculumbia obstetrician Larry Stutts.

Stutts has never run for public office before, but Armistead said he's well known in northwest Alabama because of his medical practice.

The incumbent in District 6, Democrat Roger Bedford of Russellville, is seeking re-election. District 6 covers all of Franklin County and parts of Colbert, Marion, Lauderdale and Lawrence counties.

Cumberland School of Law ties for sixth in U.S. News & World Report trial advocacy program rankings (al.com)

Samford University's Cumberland School of Law has again been ranked near the top in U.S. News and World Report's 2014 list of schools with the best programs in trial advocacy training.

Cumberland tied for sixth place with two other law schools in the category.

Others in the rankings are: 1. Stetson University, Gulfport, Fla.; 2. Temple University (Beasley), Philadelphia, Penn.; 3. Baylor University, Waco, Texas; 4. Georgetown University; 5. South Texas College of Law, Houston, Texas; 6. Illinois Institute of Technology (Chicago-Kent), Chicago, IL; 6. Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, Calif.; 6. Samford University (Cumberland); 9. Loyola University Chicago, Chicago, Ill.

In trial advocacy courses, students argue cases before mock judges and juries, and may compete in national or regional mock trial competitions, according to a press release today from Cumberland. The U.S. News ranking is based on a survey of faculty from law schools nationwide.

"Our high national ranking in trial advocacy is a testament to the hard work of the faculty and staff who teach and work in our trial advocacy program and our students and their coaches who have had exceptional success in national competitions," Cumberland dean Judge John L. Carroll stated in the press release. "Cumberland school of Law prides itself on producing lawyers who are ready to practice."

From the first year evidence course through the capstone advanced trials skills course incorporating the latest courtroom technology, Cumberland teaches students every aspect of trial law, Deborah Young, director of Cumberland's Center for Advocacy and Clinical Education, stated in the release.

"We are delighted that Cumberland's exceptional Trial Advocacy Program has once again received this national recognition," said Young. "We thank the many judges, attorneys and alumni who support our outstanding trial advocacy students."

The Cumberland program has been included in previous U.S News rankings. Cumberland student trial teams continued their history of national championships in trial advocacy by winning first place at the National Civil Trial Competition in Los Angeles, Calif., in November, according to Cumberland's press release.

[Calhoun Community College buying land for planned \\$34M expansion in Huntsville \(al.com\)](#)

A planned \$34 million expansion of Calhoun Community College's Huntsville campus is barreling towards reality.

At its meeting tonight, the Huntsville City Council will consider paying the Goodwyn, Mills and Cawood engineering firm \$108,460 to figure out how best to relocate a portion of Wynn Drive near the main entrance to the college.

A related item on the council agenda calls for the city to buy 2.7 acres needed to shift the road to the east between Old Madison Pike and Technology Drive.

103 Wynn Drive, a limited liability corporation based in Missouri, has offered to sell the land to the city for \$256,920. It also intends to sell the State Board of Education 9.91 acres bordering Calhoun Community College for \$943,000.

Calhoun spokeswoman Janet Kincherlow-Martin said the land on the west side of Wynn Drive is the site of a future 90,000-square-foot classroom building. It is being designed now by Chapman Sisson Architects.

The new classroom building is the centerpiece of a \$34 million expansion of Calhoun's Wynn Drive campus. The plan, approved in August 2012 by the state school board, also calls for an extensive renovation of the sprawling former Chrysler warehouse and office building where Calhoun has been holding classes since 1996.

"The inside of the building looks like a college, but the outside doesn't," Martin told AL.com Thursday. Calhoun President Dr. Marilyn Beck "wants to make sure both buildings look academic."

The expansion hinges on Huntsville first relocating a 1,200-foot section of Wynn Drive. The road project includes straightening a curve that Martin said is both a safety hazard and a source of frustration for students trying to come and go from campus during afternoon rush hour.

Calhoun's Huntsville campus had 3,847 students enrolled for the fall 2013 semester.

"We're excited," said Martin. "This is going to provide more space for us to grow, and it's going to help everybody that travels on Wynn Drive."

The City Council meets at 6 p.m. on the ground floor of Huntsville City Hall, 308 Fountain Circle. [Click here to view the full agenda.](#)

Senate accepts House version of flood bill that would stave off massive premium hikes (al.com)

The U.S. Senate on Thursday adopted the House version of a bill that would save flood insurance policyholders – including tens of thousands in Alabama and Mississippi – from dramatic premium increases mandated under a 2012 law.

Alabama's senators were split on the 72-22 vote. Sen. Jeff Sessions, R-Mobile, voted "yes," while Sen. Richard Shelby, R-Tuscaloosa, cast a "no" vote. Both men had voted against an earlier Senate bill that essentially delayed the current provisions from taking effect for 18 months.

Sessions could not immediately be reached for comment, but an aide noted that the House bill was paid for and would not interfere with the ability of states to regulate insurance producers, as some feared the Senate version would have. He said that ensuring "a fair flood insurance plan" for Alabamians is important to Sessions.

In a prepared statement, Shelby reiterated his opposition to government subsidies that have created a \$24 billion debt in the National Flood Insurance Program.

"The NFIP is tens of billions of dollars in debt," he said. "Strong bipartisan majorities just recently enacted necessary reforms to ensure the viability of the program and protect taxpayers. Undermining those reforms is a mistake."

Thursday's vote enjoyed strong bipartisan support. It drew opposition from a group of mostly conservative Republican senators. Most senators representing coastal states voted for the bill, though. For instance, Sen. Ted Cruz, a Texas Republican and tea party favorite, voted for the bill.

Advocates for flood insurance recipients praised the vote.

"I think this is positive that Congress in general has realized some of the mistakes they made with the first bill," said Wiley Blankenship, president and CEO of the Coastal Alabama Partnership. "This is good news. ... Now we've got something manageable. It's not perfect. Nothing ever is."

Blankenship's group has made flood insurance reform one of its top priorities.

The bill that now will be sent to President Barack Obama contains some of the provisions of legislation that the Senate passed Jan. 30. Instead of delaying the premium hikes scheduled under the 2012 law, though, it cancels them. It also preserves a "grandfather" clause that allows property owners to keep

low rates on insurance for buildings constructed before new requirements that later took effect, and to pass those rates on when someone else buys the property.

The bill would limit premium increases to an average of 15 percent per year and guarantees that no policy holder would pay more than 18 percent per year.

It also directs that the Federal Emergency Management Agency try to keep rates to no more than 1 percent of the value of their coverage for most policyholders. A policy offering \$150,000 protection, for instance, would be no more than \$1,500.

Some insurance recipients even will see refunds under the bill if they bought properties after the 2012 law and incurred large rate hikes when they received renewal notices.

U.S. Rep. Bradley Byrne, R-Fairhope, who voted in the 306-91 majority earlier this month, welcomed Thursday's vote in the Senate.

"I thank the Senate for their quick passage of this flood insurance proposal that provides relief to coastal Alabama residents from skyrocketing policies while bringing the National Flood Insurance Program back to fiscal solvency," he said in a prepared statement. "This bill makes significant reforms to the program, providing an enhanced affordability study to inform the decisions of our elected leaders and empowering communities and homeowners to challenge flood maps without adding a dollar to the deficit."