



Office of Senate President Pro Tempore Del Marsh
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Thursday, March 27, 2014

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Education budget compromise close (Montgomery Advertiser)

Early on Thursday, the 2015 education budget for Alabama looked ready to sail out of the Legislature and on to Gov. Robert Bentley.

Later on Thursday, the 2015 education budget had run aground over questions of funding for teacher insurance.

At the end of the day, an agreement on insurance appeared close, though its effect on other portions of the budget was unknown.

Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh, R-Anniston and Sen. Cam Ward, R-Alabaster said Thursday evening that the agreement, brokered in negotiations that included Bentley's staff, would fully fund the budget request from the Public Education Employees' Health Insurance Plan (PEEHIP), helping to close a \$220 million deficit in the program and, hopefully, avoid increases in the costs of teachers and support personnel's health insurance next year.

"The governor really wanted to see, and we did as well, that PEEHIP was fully funded so that those employees in no way (go to) their pockets for additional costs, and (see) no additional co-pays as well," Marsh said Thursday evening.

A number of senators Thursday refused to accept a budget that came out of conference committee that would have raised the state's match for covered individuals from \$714 per month to \$754. The number, reflective of the House version of the ETF, would be the first funding increase for the program since 2008, but less than the \$795 the PEEHIP board and Bentley had sought.

"I think PEEHIP was the stumbling block for a lot of members of this chamber," Ward said Thursday. "We realized it would be a tight education budget. Many of us did not want to see teachers take a reduction."

Questions of funding the increase have yet to be answered. Marsh said the House and Senate budget chairs — Rep. Bill Poole, R-Tuscaloosa, and Sen. Trip Pittman, R-Daphne — were still working on those details.

Jennifer Ardis, a spokeswoman for Bentley, said no compromise had been reached early Thursday evening, but said one was close.

“We’ve been working with the budget chairmen and are certainly optimistic we will have one,” she said.

The Legislature will be on break next week. An agreement could be in place by the time lawmakers return April 1.

Bentley had called for an up-or-down vote on employee pay raises earlier this month, but indicated Tuesday that his “priority” was increasing funding for teacher insurance. Ward said Bentley played a key role in Thursday’s action.

“There are several us in the Senate who believe the governor is right, and we want to follow his leadership,” he said. “I believe following his leadership, he is going to have a compromise for us after the break that will be satisfactory for everybody.”

The House and Senate conference committee budget, reflecting the version that passed the House earlier this week, did not include a pay raise or bonus for teachers or support personnel. At the conference meeting Thursday morning, Pittman praised educators in the state and said they deserved extra compensation, but also said that raises needed to be sustainable.

“We don’t take any of those efforts for granted, and we certainly know you deserve more compensation,” Pittman said. “We have to the best of our ability working on our revenue estimates and align appropriations with estimates.”

The PEEHIP deficit can be traced to a number of factors, including a smaller number of teachers and employees paying into the system, a larger number of retirees and mandated coverage for preventative services, including birth control, under the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare. PEEHIP is planning to use about \$107 million in reserves to make up the deficit; increased premiums and co-pays are possible to make up the gap, but PEEHIP officials say they are trying to avoid that.

Legislative leadership initially planned to send the budget to Bentley on Thursday after concurring in the conference committee report, but with the fight over PEEHIP in the Senate, the House adjourned

Thursday afternoon. In one stretch, the House worked from 9:30 p.m. Wednesday night to 2:30 a.m. Thursday morning.

The votes in the Senate, Pittman said earlier on Thursday, were “uncertain. And the House was tired.”

The source of the PEEHIP deficit provoked a debate between conference committee members Thursday. Republicans blamed provisions of the Affordable Care Act, including one allowing children to stay on their parents’ insurance until age 26, for the higher costs.

“The fact of the matter is the unintended consequence of Obamacare and the Affordable Care Act led to shortfall in PEEHIP,” Marsh said.

Rep. Rod Scott, D-Fairfield, suggested that the costs were due in part to Bentley’s decision not to opt into the expansion of Medicaid eligibility provided under the ACA, saying the state was taking on “all of the costs without any of the benefits.”

“Not expanding Medicaid has the unintended consequence of health care costs increasing without the coverage,” he said.

RSA Deputy Director Don Yancey said Thursday about \$65 to \$70 million of the deficit — roughly 30 percent — was attributable to the Affordable Care Act costs. Rising prescription drug costs — partly due to ACA, partly not — also play a role. There are also fewer employees paying into the system: The state has lost about 1,300 teachers since 2009, according to the Alabama State Department of Education, while the number of retirees has risen.

“That affects incomes,” Yancey said.

The conference committee budget would have allowed the Alabama State Department of Education to hire 200 new teachers, including 150 middle school teachers, according to State Superintendent of Education Tommy Bice. The House budget included funding for 400 new teachers, the department had sought funding to hire approximately 450 teachers.

“We’re disappointed we won’t get all the middle school teachers we wanted, but in the larger scheme of things, it’s OK,” he said.

Alabama Senate \$1.8 billion General Fund budget includes \$3.75 million more for Tutwiler (al.com)

MONTGOMERY, Alabama -- The Alabama Senate approved a \$1.8 billion General Fund budget Thursday, adding \$14.9 million to a version passed by the Alabama House earlier this year.

The new appropriations include \$4.8 million more for the Alabama Department of Corrections, including \$3.5 million more for the Julia Tutwiler Prison for Women.

In another line item, the state Senate's version of the budget includes \$250,000 for the governor's office to hire an ombudsman for the women's prison.

The new appropriations, if approved, are more than the Alabama House recommended, but they are far from the \$46 million in new funding the Department of Corrections had requested.

On Thursday night, Sen. Cam Ward, R-Alabaster, commended the Senate leadership for finding the new funding, but he warned that the Alabama Legislature was only kicking a big can down the road. In the coming years, lawmakers will have to enact sentencing reforms and find other ways of dealing with criminals than putting them in prison, he said, and he called the recent report by the U.S. Justice Department on Tutwiler a "wakeup call."

"There is no way to actually deal with the prison problem because you don't have enough revenue coming in," he said. "As politicians, all of us have waited so long to deal with this that we're in a bad spot here."

Ward made a veiled criticism of remarks Gov. Robert Bentley recently made on the Matt Murphy Show, when the governor said that the state would have to build more prisons. According to Ward, merely building a way out of the problem would cost too much. For the state to build its way to 140 percent capacity in its prisons would cost at least \$600 million, he said – about a third of this year's General Fund budget. Currently, state prisons are crowded to more than 190 percent of their designed capacity.

Ignoring the problem is a recipe for expensive federal intervention, he said.

"If we don't deal with it in the next couple of years, trust me when I say that somebody will do it for us," Ward said.

"If we don't deal with it in the next couple of years, trust me when I say that somebody will do it for us," Ward said.

The state Senate also approved a one-time \$400 bonus for state employees, payable out of the general fund.

Sen. Rodger Bedford, D-Russellville, pushed for a 3 percent cost of living adjustment for state employees, to be paid for by raiding a rolling reserve in the governor's emergency appropriations budget, but that amendment failed.

"I'm really sad that our state Legislature has turned its back on state employees when we had to give them a raise when they haven't received one since 2008," Bedford said after the vote.

The state Senate's amended General Fund budget will now go back to the Alabama House with three days left in the session.

Also on Thursday, a legislative conference committee approved a compromise Education Trust Fund budget, but that budget was kept from the state Senate floor because of disagreement among some Republicans, lawmakers said.

At issue is the state's contribution to health insurance for education employees. Gov. Robert Bentley has recommended a contribution equivalent to \$795 per month, per employee. The conference committee recommended a monthly contribution of \$753.

As the state Senate adjourned Thursday, Pro Tem Del Marsh, R-Anniston, said lawmakers had reached a compromise and would be fully funding the increase at the governor's recommended level.

The Alabama Legislature will be off next week for spring break and will return to Montgomery April 1.

[Senate OKs General Fund budget: \\$400 bonus for state employees survives \(Montgomery Advertiser\)](#)

The Senate on Thursday approved a \$1.8 billion budget that includes a one-time, \$400 bonus for state employees, level-funding for insurance and additional money for security enhancements and improvements in the Department of Corrections.

The budget passed the Senate 30 to 2. The House, which approved the General Fund on Feb. 26, will have to decide whether to concur or non-concur in the Senate version when lawmakers return from a week-long break April 1. If the House non-concurs, the budget will go to a conference committee.

The bonus would be the first additional compensation of any kind for state employees since 2008. Senate Finance and Taxation General Fund chairman Arthur Orr, R-Decatur, noted that state employees had seen their retirement costs increased 2.5 percent in 2011, and had seen insurance costs bumped up last year.

"It (the bonus) is a small amount, but it's certainly a start in the right direction," Orr said.

The funding comes out of a \$4.5 million line-item appropriation in the budget. Orr said Wednesday some state agencies would be able to provide the bonus from outside sources, while others would rely entirely on the appropriation.

Retirees also would get a 2 percent bonus under the budget.

Sen. Roger Bedford, D-Russellville, introduced an amendment to a budget companion bill that would have extended a 3-percent pay raise to state employees. The \$13 million raise would have been funded by the \$4.5 million bonus money, and \$8.9 million from the Departmental Emergency Fund.

The amendment was tabled on a narrow 15 to 13 vote. Republican senators Dick Brewbaker of Montgomery; Jimmy Holley of Elba and Paul Sanford of Huntsville joined independent Harri Anne Smith of Slocumb and nine Democrats in voting against the tabling motion. Sen. Bobby Singleton, D-Greensboro, joined 14 Republicans in voting for it. Five Republicans and one Democrat were listed as present.

Bedford said after the vote that "Republicans have misplaced priorities," adding later that "a one-time \$400 bonus is not as good as a 3-percent (cost-of-living) raise."

The budget provides level funding for the State Employees Insurance Board. William Ashmore, the CEO of the SEIB, said earlier this week that the board would have to make "tough decisions" on how to close an anticipated deficit.

The Department of Corrections will receive an additional \$4.8 million under the budget, the bulk of which — \$3.5 million — will go toward renovations for the Wetumpka Women's Facility. The facility is expected to receive prisoners from the Julia Tutwiler Prison for Women, currently under investigation by the U.S. Department of Justice over allegations of sexual abuse and harassment of inmates at the prison. The budget also includes \$250,000 for the governor's office to create an ombudsman to address concerns of female inmates in the system.

Orr said the facility, when completed, could hold up to 600 inmates. DOC said there were 702 prisoners, including four death row inmates, at Tutwiler at the end of November. The facility was designed to accommodate 422, a capacity rate of 167 percent. Another 250 inmates were housed at the Tutwiler Annex, in a facility designed to hold 128, a capacity of 195 percent.

"It will help the situation," Orr said. "We know the administration is here, we know the administration is taking proactive steps ... but that easing of overcrowding are, with the ombudsman, good steps we've taken to address the situation."

The budget also provides an additional \$70 million for the Alabama Medicaid Agency, which consumes over a third of the General Fund budget and covers a fifth of Alabama's residents. The additional funding boosts Medicaid's budget to \$685 million. The agency initially sought \$700 million.

Dr. Don Williamson, overseeing efforts to transform the Medicaid Agency, has said the agency can make up the difference with new methods of acquiring prescription drugs and rollover money.

State budgets on hold until after spring break (AP)

MONTGOMERY — The Alabama Legislature's approval of the two state budgets is going down to the closing days of the legislative session.

Legislative leaders had hoped to complete work on the education budget before lawmakers left on spring break Thursday, but they couldn't fashion a version that had broad support. The budget will have to wait until the Legislature returns April 1 for the final three meeting days of the 2014 session. The Senate passed a \$1.84 billion general fund budget Thursday evening, but it will have to go back to the House, which passed a slightly different version earlier. The House's review of the budget will have to wait until April 1 because the House had already left for spring break before the Senate voted 30-2.

Both budgets are for the new fiscal year starting Oct. 1.

The Legislature has 30 meeting days in its annual session to pass the budgets. Republican leaders had hoped to have at least one budget wrapped up early, but disagreements prevented that.

"You see why budgets are passed on the 30th day," said Republican Sen. Trip Pittman, of Daphne, chairman of the Finance and Taxation-Education Committee.

The House and Senate passed different versions of the \$5.9 billion education budget. A conference committee of House and Senate members tried to work out a compromise Thursday, but failed. They will try again after spring break.

Pittman said a sticking point is how much extra money is necessary for health benefits for education employees to prevent them from paying higher premiums.

The education budget discussed Thursday does not contain a pay raise or bonus for educators.

Mark Heinrich, chancellor of the state's two-year college system, said that is disappointing.

"It's been 2007, for the two-year system, since we received a raise," Heinrich said. "It is becoming increasing difficult for us to address some of the faculty issues and faculty needs, particularly as we're hiring high-tech faculty members to provide training in the high-tech areas."

One change suggested Thursday: Trimming a proposed increase from the state department of education that would allow schools to hire more middle school teachers.

Janet Womack, superintendent of Florence City Schools, said data shows high school dropouts tend to struggle and lose interest while in middle school.

"It is an area where we have the largest class sizes but also the greatest need," Womack said.

Florence uses local tax dollars to hire nine teachers more than what the state would provide, but Womack said she knows not every system has the resources to do that.

The department of education's proposal would have given Womack money for one-and-a-half additional middle school teachers. Under the budget passed Thursday, she will get less than one and will have to use local money to make up the difference.

"Anything is a step in the right direction," she said.

Morgan County Schools Superintendent Billy Hopkins said his middle school classes are the largest in the system with 25 or more students per classroom.

"We would like that number to be around 21; that'd be much more comfortable," Hopkins said.

Morgan County would have gained five teachers under the department's proposal.

"Data shows that the No. 1 thing that leads to success in the classroom is a lower teacher-student ratio," Hopkins said.

The House and Senate versions of the general fund budget include \$70 million more, or an 11 percent increase, to maintain Medicaid services for the poor and elderly. Most other state agencies would receive about the same amounts they are getting this year.

The Senate's version includes \$250,000 for the governor to hire an ombudsman to deal with problems at Tutwiler Prison for women in Wetumpka. Gov. Robert Bentley said he supports that addition.

The Senate also voted 31-0 Thursday to provide state employees with a one-time pay bonus of \$400 in the new fiscal year. That bill would also allow the governor to grant a cost-of-living raise of up to 4 percent if extra state money becomes available, which budget officials say is doubtful.

Sen. Roger Bedford, D-Russellville, proposed an unsuccessful amendment to give state employees a 3 percent cost-of-living raise, rather than a \$400 bonus. The bonus would cost about \$4.5 million; Bedford's proposal would have cost \$13 million, which he said could be made available in the budget. That bill must also go to the House after spring break.

The chairman of the Senate Finance and Taxation-General Fund Committee, Arthur Orr, R-Decatur, said some recognition of state employees is needed because they last received a cost-of-living raise in October 2008.

Tax break for small businesses clears Legislature (AP)

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — The Alabama Legislature has voted to give small businesses a tax break.

The Senate voted 23-2 Thursday to change the way sales tax payments are made. The bill, which was a priority for the Republican leadership, cleared the House 96-2 in January and now goes to the governor.

Current law requires estimated advance sales tax payments from any business whose sales tax collections over the previous year averaged at least \$1,000 per month. The legislation raises that to \$2,500. That frees about 4,000 businesses from paying ahead of time and allows them to pay based on actual collections for the previous month.

The shift will mean a one-time \$4.5 million loss in sales tax collections. But there will be no long-term change as payments resume normally after the one-month shift.

Carly's Law: 'We brought the Alabama Legislature together, which is almost unheard of' (al.com)

When Dustin Chandler woke up at 6:30 this morning with plans to head to Montgomery for the anticipated Alabama House vote on Carly's Law, his wife, Amy, had an announcement.

"My wife said, 'What happened?' What do you mean, what happened? She said, 'Well, Carly's Law passed at 2 o'clock this morning,'" Chandler said in an interview this morning.

Indeed, the Alabama House took action around 2:10 a.m. and with a 97-0 vote, representatives passed the bill named after the Chandlers' daughter that authorizes a study of marijuana-derived medication called cannabidiol, or CBD, to treat epilepsy and seizures under a study through the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

"I was shocked waking up this morning and hearing it passed at 2:10 a.m.," said Dustin Chandler, a Pelham police officer who has been actively lobbying lawmakers to approve the bill.

"I'm also shocked that this is the children's and people of Alabama's voice that was so collectively loud and consistent, and we were heard and it shows the politicians actually listened. We brought the Alabama Legislature together, which is almost unheard of," Chandler said.

The bill is named for the Chandlers' 3-year-old daughter, Carly, who has been diagnosed with a rare genetic disease that causes her frequent, violent seizures.

The bill would authorize the limited use of CBD oil under a UAB study that proponents are hoping to use from a specialized marijuana plant grown in Colorado that has demonstrated relief in children suffering from seizures and epilepsy where prescription medications have failed.

Throughout Alabama, parents want the same opportunities available in Colorado to find relief for their children. The outpouring of support included a March 1 rally in Pelham that saw hundreds of people calling for passage of the legislation.

Although the medication comes from marijuana and contains a small amount of the active ingredient in the drug, the oil given to children is not able to produce the plant's intoxicating effects in its users.

The effect seen in some children and others taking the medication is a drastic reduction in or nearly eliminating the number of violent seizures while providing a vastly improved quality of life for them and their families.

The Senate on March 11 approved the bill 34-0 vote. State Sen. Cam Ward of Alabaster said he expects the Senate to concur with the House's vote. The Senate vote could happen today.

Gov. Robert Bentley previously said he plans to sign the bill after its passage in the Legislature.

The bill includes a \$1 million study at the University of Alabama at Birmingham to examine the effectiveness of the marijuana-derived medication to treat seizure disorders.

Chandler said he spoke with state Rep. Allen Farley of McCalla, a strong proponent of Carly's Law, this morning. "When they got to Carly's Law and the speaker introduced it, Allen Farley said he was ready to debate it or answer questions," Chandler said.

"They started chanting vote, vote, vote," he said Farley told him. "He didn't even get one question from the floor."

The House approval "is a tribute to the kids and the families behind this and the people of Alabama that we brought the Legislature together for once," Chandler added. "It's good for the people of Alabama and the children of Alabama that need help."

Chandler said he's still traveling to Montgomery today in anticipation of the Senate's vote, which is needed due to some language amendments in the House-approved bill. "The first time I walked down there, they said you hardly ever pass a bill the first year. It's shocking to me," he said.

"The sun goes down and you're thinking one thing one day and it rises the next and you're on a totally different avenue," Chandler said. "God is good. It's funny how this stuff works. It's amazing to me."

Common Core repeal likely dead for 2014 Alabama legislative session (al.com)

MONTGOMERY, Alabama -- Despite the Tea Party furor in Montgomery, a bill to repeal Common Core standards in Alabama schools is, in all likelihood, dead for the 2014 legislative session.

Sen. Scott Beason, R-Gardendale, had sponsored a bill to put a moratorium on the national educational benchmarks, but that bill failed to make it to the Alabama Senate floor before an important deadline.

Under the state Alabama Legislature's rules, Wednesday was the last day a bill originating out of the state Senate could pass out of that house without a vote of unanimous consent, meaning one objecting senator could kill it.

The Common Core repeal has sufficient opposition there that, even if state Senate leaders allowed it to come to the floor for a vote, it would not pass.

On the first day of the session, Tea Party members from across the state rallied on the Alabama State House steps to demand those standards, which they view as a federal intrusion into Alabama school curricula, be repealed.

During that rally, Tea Party leaders warned that, if the standards were not repealed, they would work to unseat Republican lawmakers who did not advance their agenda.

Ban on minors riding in backs of pickups stalls in Alabama House (al.com)

MONTGOMERY, Alabama -- A bill to ban those 19-years-old and younger from riding in the back of pickup trucks has stalled in the Alabama House, leaving it unlikely to pass that the 2014 legislative session draws closer to its end.

Rep. Kerry Rich, R-Albertville, had proposed the bill, which would have included exemptions for parades, agriculture and emergencies, in reaction to a fatal wreck last year near Guntersville. That wreck killed four and injured five others when a pickup carrying 10 people collided with another vehicle and flipped.

However, Rich's bill met considerable resistance from rural lawmakers who argued that riding in the backs of pickup trucks is a part of life in their districts.

Rep. Elaine Beech, D-Chatom, finally asked that the bill be carried over, sending it back to a mix of bills competing for time at the end of the session.

Obamacare poll: Americans still deeply divided, most disapprove of healthcare law (al.com)

The latest polling by the Pew Research Center finds the country remains deeply divided over the Affordable Care Act, by race, by age, by education, by political party, even by affiliation within the GOP.

As of this month, 89 percent of Republicans disapprove of the law and 72 percent of Democrats approve.

But even within the GOP, Pew finds deep divisions. Most Tea Party Republicans favor seeing the law fail, while most other Republicans disapprove of the law but hope elected officials will make it work.

That's according to polling done from Feb. 27 through March 16. Click here for the full Pew survey "ACA at Age 4, More Disapproval than Approval."

Nationwide, Pew finds most Americans are opposed to Obamacare, as 53 percent disapprove and just 41 percent approve.

Respondents with college degrees are more likely to favor the law. Women support it more than men. Black respondents were twice as likely to approve of Obamacare as white respondents. Approvals ratings are also higher among people under 30 and among people earning under \$30,000 a year.

When asked more generally if it was government's responsibility to provide healthcare, the country was just about split. For contrast, just 28 percent saw healthcare as a government responsibility in 2006.

Alabama declines to name execution drug suppliers (AP)

Published: Thursday, March 20, 2014 at 8:43 p.m.

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — Alabama's prison commissioner is refusing to disclose the suppliers of Alabama's lethal injection drugs, citing a confidentiality order in a lawsuit filed by an inmate.

Alabama Department of Corrections Commissioner Kim Thomas issued a statement Thursday denying a public records request filed by the Associated Press. Thomas says he's unable because of a confidentiality order in a lawsuit challenging the state's lethal injection drug protocol.

The prison department is simultaneously seeking legislation that would keep the names secret and off-limits to both the public and the courts.

Alabama is one of several states fighting over execution drug secrecy.

Randy Susskind, a lawyer with the Equal Justice Initiative, says he believes the information should be available to the public. Susskind says th

Senate panel fails to vote on ASU trustees (Montgomery Advertiser)

Four Alabama State University trustees will have to wait for an official vote on their status, after a Senate committee failed to gather Wednesday afternoon to confirm or reject their nominations.

Only one senator showed up for a called 4:30 p.m. meeting to vote on the trustees. Gov. Robert Bentley, who came to the meeting, walked onto the Senate floor after 15 minutes and began lobbying individual senators on the committee, but left about an hour later without having a vote.

"I have personally interviewed all four members," Bentley said at press conference. "They are excellent committee members. They will support (ASU president) Dr. Gwendolyn Boyd, and they will ensure Alabama State moves forward and remains the great institution it is."

Bentley and ASU officials have butted heads in recent months over an ongoing investigation into ASU's finances. In October, a preliminary report on ASU finances found evidence of conflicts of interest, financial waste and numerous contracts without deliverables. ASU officials have consistently denied the allegations in the report.

Sen. Bobby Singleton, D-Greensboro, said the Legislative Black Caucus has not taken a position on the nominees. However, he said that he believed Bentley was "taking a roundabout way to take over the board," and opposed the move.

"It's not them personally," he said. "It's about what the governor is doing to the university. I am not going to put someone on the board who does what the governor wants."

The four trustees — Jacqueline Brooks, Superintendent of Macon County Schools; Robert 'Bobo' Gilpin, a Montgomery attorney; Larry Thornton, a Hueytown businessman and Fitzgerald Washington, sales manager for the Buffalo Rock Company in Tuscaloosa — currently serve on the Board of Trustees. The lack of a vote means the four will continue to serve on the Board until the committee meets to vote on their positions, whether in the current session, or until the nominations can be taken up again next year.

Bentley and senators cited numerous reasons for the failed meeting. There was opposition to some of the trustees; Sen. Jabo Waggoner, R-Vestavia Hills, the chairman of the Senate Rules Committee, said all the nominees had opposition except for Thornton. However, both Waggoner and Bentley said they believed they could get the votes to confirm the nominees.

Waggoner blamed the empty committee on a busy day in the Senate. On Thursday and after, bills that pass the Senate will require unanimous consent to be transmitted to the House; Wednesday is likely the last chance for controversial bills to make it through the Senate.

"There's some talk about rejecting some of them, but there's some talk of confirming them," he said. "They've either got to confirm them or reject them and move on."

Asked if he was planning to call a meeting to do so, Waggoner said "not right now."

Sen. Gerald Allen R-Tuscaloosa, a member of the committee, said he wasn't sure if the opposition was due to concerns about "a continuation of status quo, or if they want to some way feel like they can control the board."

Bentley called the nominees "three quality men and one quality lady."

"They are excellent candidates, and they're already doing an excellent job," he said.

Among the senators Bentley spoke to was Sen. Quinton Ross, D-Montgomery, a finalist for the presidency of ASU last year. Ross said they had "good conversation."

National Center for Sports Safety funds axed from ASU budget (Montgomery Advertiser)

Funding for the National Center for Sports Safety, named in an investigation of Alabama State University finances last fall, was cut under a compromise education budget approved in conference committee Thursday.

House Ways and Means Committee chairman Bill Poole, R-Tuscaloosa, said the funding was cut amid negotiations Thursday. The money was removed by Gov. Robert Bentley in his initial budget proposal in January, and sustained by the Senate. The House restored the funding in committee last week.

Bentley had said he was "concerned" about the House's move to restore the money, though he declined to say if the FSS report played a role in his decision to cut it, citing the ongoing investigation into ASU's finances.

"The governor had eliminated it, the Senate had eliminated it, (and) we're in a conference trying to reconcile the bills and establish priorities," Poole said Thursday, after the conference committee approved the budget. "We had to eliminate funding in lots of different areas."

The Legislature did not take up the compromise budget Thursday, amid a fight over funding for teacher insurance. Another version of the budget is expected to be presented to lawmakers when the Legislature returns April 1.

NCSS, which promotes injury prevention in youth sports, did not return a message seeking comment Thursday.

The organization had connections with former ASU trustee Lawrence Lemak. According to a preliminary report prepared by Birmingham-based Forensic Strategic Services and released by Bentley's office in October, Lemak's relatives, and companies connected with him, had received "direct financial benefits" from funding for the center provided by ASU.

The report said Lemak's son Matthew, the chairman of the board, was paid \$53,500 in 2007/2008 and his daughter-in-law, Kathryn Gwaltney, almost \$257,846 while she served as executive director between 2007 and 2011. Additionally, the report said that businesses owned or partially owned by Lawrence and Matthew Lemak received \$428,000 between 2008 and 2011. The complaints also were part of an ethics complaint filed against Lemak by a former ASU employee in March, 2013. Lemak stepped down from the board of trustees the following month, citing ill health.

Earlier this week, Matthew Lemak, the chairman of the NCSS, said the center "deeply appreciates" the Legislature's support for their program.

"Continued support for this program is saving lives and preventing life-threatening injuries for the thousands of young Alabamians who compete in the sports arena," Lemak said in the statement.

Bentley declined to comment this week on whether the FSS report played a role in his decision to strike the funding for the center, but said he was concerned by the House restoring it.

Summary of action in Alabama Legislature (AP)

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — A summary of action in the Alabama Legislature on Thursday, the 27th meeting day of the regular session:

HOUSE:

- Approved a bill to reorganize the administrative functions of the Legislature. Goes to Senate.
- Delayed action on a bill that would prohibit people under age 19 from riding in the bed of a pickup truck.

—Approved a bill to allow people to petition a circuit court judge to wipe arrests from their record for some nonviolent misdemeanors and felonies if they were found not guilty or if the charges were dropped. Goes to Senate.

—Approved a bill to make changes to state rental law including allowing a landlord to consider a property abandoned if the power is off for seven consecutive days. Goes to governor.

SENATE:

—Joined the House in giving final approval to a bill allowing the University of Alabama at Birmingham to do a study of using a marijuana derivative to treat seizures. Goes to governor.

—Approved two proposed constitutional amendments to change the state Constitution's articles on impeached and separation of powers. Go to House.

—Approved a \$1.8 billion General Fund budget. Goes to House.

—Approved a one-time bonus of \$400 for state employees. Goes to House.

—Gave final approval to a bill providing a break on sales tax payments for some small businesses. Goes to governor.

COMMITTEES:

—Senate Fiscal Responsibility and Accountability Committee approved a House-passed bill to merge the state Examiners of Public Accounts into the state auditor's office. Goes to Senate.

AGENDA:

—House meets at 1 p.m. April 1 and Senate at 2 p.m.

March 20 in the Legislature (Montgomery Advertiser)

A look at the action in the Alabama Legislature on Thursday, the 27th legislative day.

House of Representatives

- Passed HB 317, sponsored by Rep. Chris England, D-Tuscaloosa, which would allow for the expungement of a criminal record if the charges were dropped.
- Passed SB 151, sponsored by Sen. Tom Whatley, R-Auburn, which would criminalize bestiality.
- The House will return at 1 p.m. April 1.

Senate

- Passed HB 235, sponsored by Rep. Steve Clouse, R-Ozark, the 2015 General Fund budget.

- Passed SB 253, sponsored by Sen. Del Marsh, R-Anniston, revising the impeachment article of the 1901 Alabama Constitution.
- Passed SB 261, sponsored by Sen. Jerry Fielding, R-Sylacauga, revising the separation of powers article of the 1901 Alabama Constitution.
- Passed SB 398, sponsored by Sen. Gerald Dial, R-Lineville, allowing prosecutors to gain access to certain juvenile court records concerning children.
- Passed SB 367, sponsored by Sen. Del Marsh, R-Anniston, granting limited powers to county commissions in the state.
- The Senate will return at 2 p.m. April 1.

Dissecting the crushing anti-AEA ad currently running on statewide TV (Yellowhammer News)

The Foundation for Accountability in Education has just gone up on statewide TV with a crushing anti-Alabama Education Association (AEA) ad driving home conservatives' belief that the AEA is the biggest obstacle to improving education in Alabama, and noting that the liberal group is now running candidates in Republican primaries.

Here's the transcript of the ad titled, "If I Wanted Our Children to Fail..." which can be viewed above.

If I wanted our children to fail ...

... I'd need a stranglehold on the public schools.

And I'd use the power of liberal big government unions to get it.

I'd fill their coffers with your tax dollars ...

... And bankroll politicians who'd block reform.

Then, I'd make it impossible to pay our best teachers more money ...

... And equally impossible for our poorest families to escape the schools that are failing them.

I'd call myself the "Alabama Education Association."

But I wouldn't fight for education. Or students. Or parents. Or our best teachers.

I'd fight for mediocrity over merit and seniority instead of success.

If I wanted our children to fail ...

I'd even slip liberal politicians into our primaries, pretend they were conservatives
... and hope you didn't notice.

Sponsored by Foundation for Accountability in Education.

Let's take a minute to dissect the ad, breaking down what real-world situation each line is probably describing.

Line:

If I wanted our children to fail ...
... I'd need a stranglehold on the public schools.

Explanation:

From The Daily Caller –

For much of the last four decades, the Alabama Education Association has risen to become one of the most powerful teachers' unions in the country. As odd as it may seem in a dark red state, over the years long-time AEA executive director Paul Hubbert, oftentimes described as the "shadow governor" of Alabama, has earned his union the distinction of being one of the most politically involved organizations of its type in the country.

Line:

And I'd use the power of liberal big government unions to get it.
I'd fill their coffers with your tax dollars ...
... And bankroll politicians who'd block reform.

Explanation:

The AEA is the Alabama affiliate of the National Education Association, America's largest teachers' union.

The NEA and their affiliates spent \$2,475,284 on lobbying in 2013. They have so far in the 2014 election cycle been the top contributing group of any organization in the US, making \$17,627,865 in political contributions (ranked #1 of 12,890 groups tracked by OpenSecrets.org). And the overwhelming majority of that money goes to liberals.

This bar shows the difference in the number of Democrats the NEA has donated to this cycle, compared to the number of Republicans (Blue = Dem, Red = GOP).

NEA Donations

Students, teachers, parents, and hardworking Americans are all victims of what the video below describes as a “political machine” that takes money out of taxpayers’ wallets and gives it to union bosses, who turn around and put it in the pockets of politicians. This video is the best explanation we’ve seen of how the teachers’ union coffers are being filled with our tax dollars.

[Politics may be broken, but the love of cornbread proves we all can work together \(al.com\)](#)

You don’t have to be a genius to realize that the nation’s two primary political parties are not playing together very well these days.

There is rancor and downright disdain at every level of government and if you believe in polls, the electorate is pretty much tired of all the fighting. It’s both sides of the aisle, too.

Well, the Alabama House of Representatives on Wednesday took a huge step toward overcoming the perception that the political system in this nation is broken. And they did so over a pan of cornbread.

The state’s lawmakers came together in a bipartisan way to support a joint resolution that names cornbread as the official bread of the state of Alabama. It was passed on a voice vote on the floor of the House and by all accounts the measure had overwhelming support from both parties.

There is no record of how the biscuit, baguette, croissant or light-bread lobbies reacted to the news that cornbread was on its way to state-sanctioned greatness. As a long-time student of politics, I can only assume that the measure caught them flat-footed and they are scrambling to come up with a formidable challenge to this effort.

But they may be too late.

The measure, which is largely ceremonial, now goes to the Alabama Senate for another vote. My fingers are crossed that the upper chamber will act with the same swift and bipartisan effort that carried the resolution swiftly through the House of Representatives.

In the spirit of full disclosure, let me confess that effort has been a pet project of mine for a while. I’ve been pestering lawmakers for some time now to elevate cornbread to the level of honor that our forebears intended.

Is spending time on something as trivial as a resolution making cornbread the official bread of Alabama of life-changing importance? Probably not. The state is facing some huge obstacles and heaven knows our lawmakers don't need any added distraction from their chores.

But maybe, just maybe, if our lawmakers can unite around a common issue such as cornbread, maybe they can come together over more meaty topics.

Your working boy is an unabashed supporter of the cornbread arts. I like mine like my mama used to make it: in a cast iron skillet, with buttermilk and served hot with sweet cream butter. And nowhere in the recipe will you find any hint of sugar or any other sweetener.

You know my preferred method of cooking cornbread. For those of you who missed it yesterday, here it is again.

It is pretty much a basic recipe that most everybody's mama cooked at one time or another. That's why I like it; it's familiar and it has a nice bit of twang from the buttermilk.

I suggest to you that there is no better way to drum up support among the members of the Alabama Senate than to pressure them by showing off your own personal cornbread tales. How about what you like to adorn your cornbread, if at all. (I like sweet cream butter, but that's just me.)

And pictures; in this digital age there is no reason for you to not be putting your cornbread photos out there to share with the rest of the world.

So send me your recipes, your corn pone tales and your photographs of how you prefer to eat cornbread and I'll be certain that our folks in Montgomery are aware of how deep our love of cornbread really is.

The battle is only half done. My fellow Alabamians, it's too late to turn back now. We are almost there, victory is in our sights. Send me your stories and let's get this thing done.

OK, we've established to cornbread is the go-side dish for traditional Southern cooking, but it's also a basis for a couple of tasty main dish meals. Since it is crawfish season, I figured I might as well include this very easy, very tasty recipe that I've had for a long, long time.

So while the cornbread is in the oven, get busy and let me know how you like your cornbread. The folks in Montgomery are listening!

[Remington Outdoor posts 20 job openings for Alabama's new \\$110M production plant \(al.com\)](#)

A month after announcing it will open a \$110 million manufacturing plant in the Rocket City, Remington Outdoor Co. has listed 20 new job openings for Huntsville workers on its website.

The North Carolina gunmaker is hiring local team members in a variety of fields, including human resources, engineering, analysis and information technology.

[Click here](#) to view the available jobs.

The new state-of-the-arms production facility will be located at the former Chrysler building near Huntsville International Airport and could open as early as 2015. City officials have said the average annual salary for a plant worker in Huntsville before benefits will be \$42,000, or \$20.19 per hour.

[Related: Want a Remington job? Here's what you need to do now]

Alabama Industrial Development Training (AIDT) will provide pre-employment screening and training for the Remington plant as part of an incentive valued at \$15.9 million. Prospective workers should visit AIDT's website for more details.

[Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal talks school choice, economic competition during stop in Mobile \(al.com\)](#)

Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal, a possible GOP 2016 presidential candidate, might be able to differentiate himself from the rest of the early Republican field because of his background in health administration.

But the 42-year-old governor -- in Mobile Thursday to speak during the Alabama Policy Institute's annual meeting at the Arthur R. Outlaw Mobile Convention Center -- said the upcoming GOP campaign cannot solely focus on opposing President Barack Obama and the Affordable Care Act.

"Certainly, I have a background in health care, but (a presidential campaign) needs to be about ideas (focused on) producing more energy at home, producing more manufacturing jobs and making education more successful and affordable for families," said Jindal, former secretary of the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals and president of the University of Louisiana System. "I'm against ObamaCare. It needs to be repealed and replaced. But we also need to offer our own ideas."

Jindal spoke to AL.com before his speech. He touted his "America Next" conservative policy group formed last year that focuses on establishing a vision on what conservative policies can accomplish when put into practice.

The two-term governor who is viewed as a long-shot contender for the presidency has said that the Republican Party should stop being the "party of no" and develop solutions instead.

"This country is at an important point in our history," Jindal said. "We can get our government under control. As conservatives, we owe (the public) that serious debate and to give the detailed alternatives."

One alternative Jindal is pushing of late is the promotion of school choice.

He wrote an Op-Ed in Tuesday's New York Post calling New York Mayor Bill de Blasio a "petulant little child" for the mayor's position against charter schools.

Jindal, on Thursday, credited Eva Moskowitz, the founder of the Success chain of 22 charter schools in New York City, for "taking at-risk kids and doing phenomenally well."

"It seems amazing to me that the mayor is trying to kick them out of their building," Jindal said. "We want our kids to be able to get a good job and education with good paying jobs."

Jindal said he favors giving parents the ability to choose which school to send their children.

"Anyone who wants to deny these parents a chance to get their kids a great education, whether its Eric Holder with the Department of Justice or Mayor de Blasio, should meet with the parents first," he said.

Jindal also defended Louisiana's competitive nature with the state of Alabama, saying economic competition is good for both states.

Louisiana recently offered more than \$10 million in economic incentives to lure the corporate headquarters of International Shipholding from Mobile to New Orleans.

The company was once headquartered in New Orleans but was came to Mobile – thanks to a \$4 million performance-based incentive package from Mobile city and county governments and the state of Alabama – following Hurricane Katrina.

"I think that competition is a good thing," Jindal said. "I think there are times when we beat Alabama and other times Alabama beats us. I think it makes both states stronger. It makes both states better. It forces us to have business-friendly policies, forces us to lower taxes."

The relocation will disburse 100 of the company's jobs back to New Orleans. Thirty-five employees will maintain a presence in Mobile.