



Office of Senate President Pro Tempore Del Marsh
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Alabama gets high marks for economic development activity in 2013 (al.com)

MONTGOMERY, Alabama -- Site Selection magazine has ranked Alabama in the top 10 states for the most economic development projects per capita in 2013.

The state ranked No. 7 on the list that was topped by Nebraska.

Meanwhile, the magazine also ranked three Alabama cities in the national top 10 in their respective categories for economic development activity last year. They are Cullman, Decatur and the Auburn-Opelika area.

The rankings are part of Site Selection's Governors Cup competition. Texas topped the list for total number of projects. See how other states ranked.

Alabama Secretary of Commerce Greg Canfield said the rankings show that economic developers across the state are making progress in implementing the strategic growth plan, Accelerate Alabama.

"This high ranking confirms that Alabama is a very attractive location for corporate decision-makers because of our pro-business policies, our dedicated workforce and our top-ranked job-training program," Canfield said in a prepared statement.

Atlanta-based Site Selection magazine has awarded the Governors Cup each year since 1978 to the state with the most new and expanded corporate facilities as tracked by a proprietary database. This year, it launched a per capita category to even the playing field for states with smaller populations.

To qualify, a project must involve an investment of at least \$1 million, create at least 50 jobs or add at least 20,000 square feet of floor area.

Cullman ranked No. 3 among cities with a population between 10,000 and 50,000. On the list of metros with populations of less than 200,000, Decatur was No. 6 and Auburn-Opelika was No. 9.

Expanding Medicaid would cost Alabama more than it receives, Troy University study finds (al.com)

Expanding Medicaid in Alabama would cost state government more than it would receive in new tax revenue from increased economic activity, according a new report challenging a pair of earlier findings.

Produced by Troy University's Manuel H. Johnson Center for Political Economy, the study released Monday by professors Scott Beaulier and Phillip Mixon, concludes that a University of Alabama at Birmingham report in 2012 and a 2013 University of Alabama study rely on faulty assumptions in concluding that the accepting additional federal funds for Medicaid would generate millions of dollars in additional tax revenue and create tens of thousands of jobs.

Authors of the Troy study argue that under the best-case scenario, new tax revenue would exceed added costs only during the three years that the federal government picks up 100 percent of the expansion.

"Financially, I do not think it's a good deal for the state," Mixon said in an interview.

Medicaid has been a hotly debated issue in Alabama since Gov. Robert Bentley decided the state would reject additional federal funds to expand coverage to residents earning up to 138 percent of the federal poverty line. Congress included the expansion in the Affordable Care Act, which also created taxpayer-financed subsidies for higher-income people who had trouble affording insurance on their own.

But the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 2012 that states could not be compelled to participate in the Medicaid expansion, and Alabama is one of 25 states has not taken the federal money. That has left between 181,000 and 300,000 Alabamians too rich to qualify for Medicaid but too poor to be eligible for subsidies.

The governor has come under intense pressure from hospital administrators, Democratic lawmakers and others to change his mind. David Bronner, the longtime chief of the state employees' pension fund, has argued that Bentley's decision will hurt the state and stunt economic growth.

He has repeatedly pointed to the UAB study in arguing that \$11.7 billion in new federal Medicaid spending from 2014 to 2020, plus an additional \$8.1 million in spinoff economic activity, would generate more than \$1.7 billion in new tax revenue – more than paying for the added cost to state government. The University of Alabama study projected that the spending increases would spark job gains ranging from 24,613 to 51,918 – with a middle estimate of 30,722 jobs.

Flawed methodology cited

Beaulier, executive director of the Johnson Center, said both the Alabama and the UAB studies should be viewed in the context of the political agenda of the Alabama Hospital Association, which commissioned the work.

The Johnson Center, too, has come under criticism for its political influences. It launched with a \$1.2 million grant from the Koch Foundation, along with matching funds from the BB&T Charitable Foundation and former Federal Reserve Board Vice Chairman Manuel "Manley" Johnson. Industrialists Charles and David Koch have played an aggressive role in funding conservative political candidates and causes and have become the target of critics on the left as a result.

But Beaulier said his research is independent and offers a free-market perspective often lacking in academia.

"We feel like the work we are presenting here is actually a minority position," he said.

The Troy study contends that earlier analyses make faulty assumptions that result in unrealistically optimistic projections of economic gains. Among the flaws, Beaulier and Mixon argue, are:

Failure to take into account a current doctor shortage. Bentley has made a similar argument, contending that it takes years to produce a doctor and that the supply will not magically grow just because the federal government provides health insurance to more people.

Use of unrealistically low estimates of overhead costs in the administration of the Medicaid program.
Use of flawed data in calculating tax revenue.

The Troy authors point to data from the Alabama Rural Health Association indicating that 60 of 67 counties in the state have a shortage of primary-care providers. They also argue the previous studies have failed to take into account the increased demand for providers that higher Medicaid spending would trigger, exacerbating the shortage.

If the additional health care employees came from Alabama's current labor pool, they wrote, it would reduce the state's unemployment rate below what economists generally consider full employment. The professors also argue that Alabama would be competing against other Medicaid-expanding states for health care providers living outside of Alabama and that states with larger numbers of Medicaid recipients would have an advantage in attracting those workers.

"UAB (hospital) is full right now. Other hospitals don't have a lot of beds," Beaulier said. "We don't think the world is as flexible as UAB does."

Administrative costs underestimated?

The Troy report also argues that the UAB study underestimates administrative costs at 2.25 percent of spending, which its authors said is based on historical data. But Beaulier and Mixon point out that the Alabama Medicaid Agency already has the smallest share of overhead cost in the country at 3.3 percent. It is doubtful that the state can significantly improve on that, they said.

To calculate tax revenue, the UAB study combines the new Medicaid spending with spinoff economic activity generated by that spending and multiplies the total by 8.6 percent, the average state and local tax burden in Alabama as calculated by the Federation of Tax Administrators.

Beaulier and Mixon expressed skepticism that the spinoff economic activity would be as great as the UAB study suggests. Even setting that aside, though, they said the tax revenue projection is flawed for two reasons.

First, Mixon said, including local tax revenue inflates the taxes flowing to Medicaid because only state taxes support Alabama's share of the program costs. In addition, the Troy study figures tax revenue only from the spinoff economic activity; Mixon said the Medicaid spending should not be used because, "fortunately in Alabama, that's one thing that is not taxed – medical care."

Moreover, the Troy study notes that the Alabama and UAB studies use data from the Congressional Budget Office to determine the growth in the cost of medical care, which Beaulier and Mixon argue is both overly optimistic and fails to factor regional differences.

Adjusting the UAB projections to remove untaxed medical spending, the Troy authors project that new revenue would exceed the additional state costs only in the three years that the feds pay the expansion costs.

Beaulier and Mixon estimate that by 2020, the differential assuming UAB's middle estimate of the number of new Medicaid enrollees would be \$224.9 million – compared with UAB's projection that the state would be \$16.6 million in the black. Using a more conservative model developed by the professors, the Troy study suggests that costs could exceed new tax revenues even in the early years.

Beaulier said expanding Medicaid would create benefits for the state, including a substantial increase in the number of Alabamians with health insurance. He said supporters should focus on those outcomes rather than trying to oversell the economic benefits.

"They're overdoing it and playing up the job-creation benefit," he said. "They're making it too good to be true," he said.

Compromise on the way? Senior state senator offers substitute Birmingham Water Works bill that keeps reforms, preserves city majority (al.com)

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama--State Sen. Jabo Waggoner, R-Vestavia Hills, is offering a compromise that he hopes will quell controversy over legislation to revamp the Birmingham Water Works Board and implement new operating rules.

Waggoner's latest legislation would create a seven-member board: four members appointed by the Birmingham City Council, one selected by the Jefferson County Commission, a member chosen by the Jefferson County Mayors Association and one rotating member from Blount, St. Clair, Shelby and Walker Counties.

Waggoner said he'll file his latest bill in an attempt to end fighting over board representation and Birmingham's majority, and focus more on board reforms.

"It's very reasonable," Waggoner told AL.com. "For the life of me I can't understand why they're going to this extent to avoid putting two additional members on the Water Works Board."

Under Waggoner's original bill, a new nine member water board would be comprised of five from outside the city and just four from Birmingham. That bill passed the Senate Fiscal Responsibility and Accountability Committee last month.

But Waggoner at the time said he was open to some negotiation and held off sending the bill to the full senate.

Currently all five board members are appointed by the Birmingham City Council. Waggoner said his new bill takes the issue of Birmingham's representation off the table, but keeps a focus on reforms.

"I've had a substitute bill prepared for three weeks," Waggoner said. "Not one lobbyist has come to my office. All of that fell on deaf ears, so I had to compromise with myself."

Board changes remaining in the new Waggoner bill include reducing the years of board terms from six years to four years, a two-term limit for service, capping monthly stipends for board members to \$500 a month.

Birmingham Water Works Board Meeting

An Executive Committee meeting of the Birmingham Water Works Board. (Frank Couch/fcouch@al.com)

Additionally, the bill would require public hearings before water rate increases are enacted and require board members to submit to stronger reporting rules with the Alabama Ethics Commission.

Bills pending in the House of Representatives include similar new rules, along with board expansion. Waggoner has not yet sought a companion bill in the House for his newest proposal.

"Not one lobbyist has come to my office," said Sen. Jabo Waggoner. "All of that fell on deaf ears, so I had to compromise with myself."

Waggoner and Rep. Paul DeMarco, R-Homewood, were the earliest advocates for term limits, mandatory public hearings before rate increases and expansion of the board to include members from the five counties serviced by the utility.

Waggoner said he recently made contact with some Birmingham senators to begin a conversation about his compromise.

Under the new bill, six of the seven Water Works Board members would serve four year terms, while a rotating member from outlying counties would change annually.

Waggoner, a 47-year legislative veteran and the Senate Majority Leader, said he's never seen as many lobbyists deployed to trounce a single bill.

So far, he said neither agents from the city of Birmingham nor the Water Works have sought to compromise, but rather are acting on orders to kill any Water Works reform legislation.

"It's just unbelievable the extent they're going to to stop this," Waggoner said. "They just have a multitude of lobbyists. They're not talking."

At least they're not talking to him, Waggoner said.

"It's very curious to me, why. I don't understand why they don't want another set of ears and another set of eyes to the board," he said.

City leaders have argued against Water Works bills, calling them unfair because they attempt to dilute Birmingham's authority on the utility.

Most Water Works Board members also oppose legislation, calling it unnecessary. They have said the authority is already transparent, inclusive and has taken voluntary steps to reduce board pay.

Mayor William Bell during his State of the City address in January called for a compromise with legislators and offered to mediate. On the other hand, he also recommended the city hire its own team of lobbyists at a cost of \$130,000.

Both the Water Works Board and the city have hired their own teams of lobbyists and political consultants, in part to monitor and help fight the legislation. The total tab is about \$350,000 between the two public entities.

The Water Works is set to spend at least \$210,000 on state lobbyists and political consultants in a year. That includes the utility's hiring of two firms leading up to the current legislative session at \$120,000.

"This bill has been a good payday for the lobbyists," Waggoner said.

Bill would create sales tax holiday on guns, ammo (Montgomery Advertiser)

An Alabama lawmaker has introduced legislation that would create an annual sales tax holiday for guns, ammunition and firearms supplies.

The state already has sales tax holidays for back-to-school and severe weather preparedness supplies.

Rep. Becky Nordgren, R-Gadsden, filed a bill that would waive sales and use tax on guns and ammunition the weekend prior to Independence Day every year.

Nordgren said she believes the sales tax holiday could attract customers from neighboring states during the holiday weekend, which would help with tourism and sales tax on other goods.

"Once it catches on, I can see our Fourth of July weekends benefitting from the promotion," Nordgren said. "Maybe we'll see some gun shows ... that would get people here to stay the weekend."

Norris Green, director of the Legislative Fiscal Office, said there hasn't yet been an analysis on the financial impact of the bill, but it will happen when and if the bill gets put on a committee meeting agenda.

Sales tax revenue goes into the state's Education Trust Fund, which is the funding source for public schools and post-secondary education.

Green said the school supplies tax holiday was estimated to cost the state \$3.4 million annually, and the emergency preparedness holiday about \$2 million annually.

He said the state's revenue department hasn't done any actual analysis since the bills went into effect, which was in 2006 for the school supplies bill and in 2012 for the emergency preparedness bill.

Nordgren said the sales tax holiday will help make guns and ammunition affordable, especially since high demand has driven costs up, she said. A lot of "average working folks" can't afford to have weapons anymore, she added.

She said the savings also will help people afford important safety accessories such as locks and gun cases.

Originator of fetal heartbeat bill wants it to spark challenge to Roe v. Wade decision (AP)

MONTGOMERY, Alabama — The Alabama House is set to debate four abortion bills Tuesday, including a "fetal heartbeat" measure that supporters and opponents agree will likely face an immediate court challenge if it becomes law — and in some ways that's exactly what proponents want.

The bill would ban abortions after a fetal heartbeat is detected. Two states that enacted similar fetal heartbeat laws, Arkansas and North Dakota, had those laws temporarily enjoined by federal judges. Abortion opponents see that kind of legal action as a first step toward a U.S. Supreme Court case that could ultimately destroy the legal foundation for abortion.

Ohio-based anti-abortion activist Janet Porter, who pushed for the nation's first fetal heartbeat legislation in Ohio in 2011, said she came up with the idea in the hopes of sparking court cases to challenge the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision that legalized abortion.

"We need to quit regulating abortion and bring it to an end. If ... we can't rescue every child from the burning building, let's get as many as we can," Porter said in an interview.

If Alabama's fetal heartbeat bill wins final passage, it will tie Alabama with North Dakota as having the most stringent abortion ban in the country, opponents of the legislation said.

The Ohio legislation failed, but Arkansas approved a 12-week ban, prohibiting abortions when a fetal heartbeat can be detected using an abdominal ultrasound. North Dakota followed with a law similar to what is proposed in Alabama, to ban abortion once a fetal heartbeat can be detected at all.

"This legislature is yet again putting the state of Alabama at risk of litigation," said Susan Watson, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Alabama. "Abortion is a constitutionally protected right for women in the United States of America. That law would virtually prohibit all abortions in Alabama."

Nikema Williams, vice president of public policy for Planned Parenthood Southeast, said the proposal would ban abortions beginning at about six weeks, before many women realize they are pregnant.

Both the Arkansas and North Dakota laws were met with lawsuits and put on temporary hold by the courts.

Alabama House Speaker Mike Hubbard, R-Auburn, said the threat of lawsuits should not determine which laws are passed.

"I'm sure we have the ACLU and the Southern Poverty Law Center and all sorts of liberal organizations that will challenge whatever we do. That's not going to prevent us from doing what is right and to protect life," Hubbard said.

Bill sponsor Rep. Mary Sue McClurkin, R-Indian Springs, said a heartbeat is universally equated with life and should be protected.

The Alabama bill would allow exemptions to save the life of the mother, but not for rape or incest.

"It is a life, no matter what the circumstances are," McClurkin said.

Fetal heartbeat legislation has been introduced recently in Kansas, Kentucky and Ohio, said Elizabeth Nash, state issues manager for the Guttmacher Institute. The reproductive rights think-tank tracks state policies on Medicaid abortions.

Three other abortion bills are also set for debate Tuesday in the Alabama House.

Current Alabama law requires women to receive information, either in person or through the mail, about abortion alternatives and possible adverse outcomes 24 hours before having an abortion. A proposal up for debate would increase the waiting period to 48 hours.

"It's giving her a little bit more time to consider her actions, what the outcome will be and what the risks are," bill sponsor Rep. Ed Henry, R-Hartselle, said.

Another bill would require parents to submit a birth certificate or other proof of parenthood when giving consent for their daughter to have an abortion. Proponents of the bill told a House committee it would ensure that the adult accompanying the girl to the abortion clinic is actually the parent. Opponents said many people lack a copy of a birth certificate and the parental relationship could be established through other means.

Alabama requires minors seeking an abortion to have permission from their parent or a judge. For judicial permission, the bill would require minors to file the legal paperwork in their home county. Currently, they can request judicial permission in the county where the abortion will be performed. The bill would also give the court the ability to appoint a guardian ad litem to represent the interests of the fetus.

A final bill would require women seeking an abortion because of lethal fetal anomalies to be advised about the availability of perinatal hospice services.

Watson called all four bills a "disrespectful" attempt to put up barriers to women seeking an abortion.

[MoveOn.org campaign targets Medicaid expansion 'holdout states' but not Alabama \(al.com\)](#)

The liberal advocacy group MoveOn.org is coming with billboards, petitions and rallies to a Medicaid expansion "holdout" state near you -- but not Alabama.

Texas, Florida, Virginia, Nebraska, Louisiana and Wisconsin are the targets as part of a nationwide campaign by the California group for Medicaid expansion.

MoveOn spokesman Brett Abrams said MoveOn does have a presence in Alabama. There are three petitions with more than 8,800 signatures urging the governor to expand Medicaid.

Here's one.

"Unlike in the other states (we) were unable to secure billboards in Alabama at this time," Abrams said in an email.

Alabama Gov. Robert Bentley has decided to reject federal funding under the Affordable Care Act to expand Medicaid coverage to those earning up to 138 percent of the federal poverty line. The decision leaves a coverage gap where there are between 181,000 and 300,000 residents too rich to qualify for Medicaid and too poor to qualify for insurance subsidies.

In Texas, MoveOn funded two billboards, which state: "Welcome to Texas! Where Gov. Perry has denied 1,046,000 Texans health care and now all Texans are paying for it. It's like a whole other country."

A rally at the state capitol in Austin will be held next week, MoveOn reports.

Similar actions are going on the other targeted states.

As part of the national campaign for Medicaid expansion, MoveOn has collected 190,000 petition signatures, made nearly 8,000 phone calls to elected officials and contributed \$120,000.

"MoveOn members will hold accountable the Republican governors and elected officials who continue to prevent millions of Americans from gaining access to health care," said Anna Galland, executive director of MoveOn.org Civic Action in the release. "Expanding Medicaid coverage so that every American has access to health care coverage will save these states money in the long run, and it is the right thing to do. MoveOn members will not stop fighting until every American has access to affordable health care."

Adding more fuel to the hot debate, this morning a new study out of Troy University concluded that expanding Medicaid in Alabama would cost the state more than it would receive in new tax revenue. The study challenges findings in two earlier studies.

Alabama is one of 19 states not moving forward with expansion, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation. Six states are still debating it and 26 states and the District of Columbia are implementing the expansion.

Week ahead: Alabama House to consider fetal heartbeat bill, other new restrictions on abortion (al.com)

MONTGOMERY, Alabama --- The Alabama House of Representatives is scheduled to debate four bills that would add new restrictions on abortion Tuesday.

The bills are:

-- HB 490, would prohibit abortions in cases where a fetal heartbeat is detected, which can occur as early as six or seven weeks.

-- HB 489, would increase from 24 to 48 hours the required time between when a women receives state-mandated information about adoption services and other issues before undergoing an abortion.

-- HB 493, would require doctors to provide women with information about post-birth hospice services before aborting a fetus with a lethal anomaly, a defect reasonably certain to cause death within three months after birth.

-- HB 494, would tighten the law on minors receiving parental consent for an abortion.

Also on Tuesday, the House Judiciary Committee is scheduled to consider SB 108, which would allow expungement of criminal records in certain cases where a person was charged but not convicted.

On Wednesday, Senate committees are expected to consider:

-- SB 354, would make it legal to carry a loaded pistol in a vehicle without a concealed carry permit.

-- HB 141, would carve out an exception in state law on veterinary medicine to allow nonprofit spay neuter clinics to continue to operate.

-- SB 353, would prohibit school districts from using seniority as the main factor when they decide which teachers to lay off when there are funding cuts. A public hearing is scheduled.

House committees are scheduled to consider these bills on Wednesday:

-- SB 184, which is the state education budget for fiscal year 2015, would provide a 1 percent bonus for school employees and allocate \$10 million for 250 new middle school teachers.

-- HB 503, would allow children who attend home school and church school to participate in public school athletic programs.

-- SB 168, would prohibit smoking in workplaces and public places, with exceptions.

-- HB 145, would cap annual percentage rates on payday loans at 36 percent. The rates can currently exceed 400 percent.

Tuesday will be the 20th day of the legislative session, which can have up to 30 days.

Support for Carly's law driven by Spirit of Compassion (State Rep. Mike Ball)

Carly's Law is a spiritual issue, not a political issue. It is clothed in the Spirit of Compassion. I never thought of Compassion as a powerful force until I started working on Carly's Law. It has led me to really comprehend the ramifications of the shortest verse in the Bible, "Jesus wept." Since I started this journey with Carly's Law, I have struggled with uncontrollable tears.

Although I have been an active participant in formulating, sponsoring, and promoting "Carly's Law;" in many ways I have been more of a spectator as I watch the power of Compassion do the heavy lifting of changing hearts. Jesus was clothed in Compassion when he raised Lazarus from the dead, healed the sick, and opened blinded eyes. I believe it was even Compassion disguised as Anger that compelled him to overturn the moneychangers' tables in the temple.

Politics is a messy business that gets even messier during election season. Our form of government makes it inevitable. I strongly suspect much of the messiness was intentionally built in by our Founding Fathers as a means to keep powerful forces in check. But it has unpleasant side-effects.

If Carly's Law is successful, it will not be because its supporters yelled the loudest, sent the most cut-and-pasted emails, or had the most money.

Legislators are bombarded on all sides by many individuals and groups with many needs, opinions, ideas, pleas and demands. We squabble among ourselves. We are often surrounded by chaos and

confusion. As we search for clarity among the confusion, we sometimes get defensive and hard-hearted. It's not because we're cruel and don't care; it's just human behavior.

If Carly's Law is successful, it will not be because its supporters yelled the loudest, sent the most cut-and-pasted emails, or had the most money. It will be because its supporters are driven by Compassion. Compassion for suffering children. Compassion for their families who suffer with them. Compassion for our adversaries. And even Compassion for legislators. Compassion that makes hard hearts tender. Compassion that cuts through the chaos. Compassion that makes me and Jesus cry.

Strange fights subpoena to testify in Barron trial (AP)

Alabama's attorney general is fighting efforts by former state Senate leader Lowell Barron to call him as a defense witness in Barron's trial on campaign finance charges.

Attorney General Luther Strange argues in court papers that he shouldn't be called as a witness because his office conducted the investigation that led to a grand jury indictment against Barron and a former campaign assistant. He also argues that he "has no direct knowledge about issues relevant to this criminal proceeding."

DeKalb County Circuit Judge Randall Cole has scheduled a hearing Friday in preparation for a trial starting April 14 in Fort Payne.

Barron, a Democrat from Fyffe, served in the Alabama Senate from 1982 until his defeat in 2010. He held a variety of leadership positions, including president pro tem of the Senate and Senate Rules Committee chairman.

Presented with the results of Strange's investigation, a DeKalb County grand jury indicted Barron and former assistant Rhonda Jill Johnson in April 2013 on charges of diverting \$58,000 from Barron's 2010 campaign account and a campaign car for Johnson's personal use and for non-campaign uses. Both have pleaded not guilty.

Barron's attorney, Joe Espy, recently had a subpoena issued for Strange to testify at the trial.

In court papers filed Friday, the attorney general sought to block his subpoena, arguing that it is inappropriate and unnecessary.

"Defendant Barron cannot show a 'compelling need' for the testimony of the chief prosecutor for the State in a case being prosecuted by the Office of Attorney General," Strange's staff wrote.

When Barron was indicted last April, he said he was "the victim of a vicious witch hunt by Luther Strange from Montgomery."

In court papers, Strange is asking the judge to bar Barron's attorneys from using the trial to question the motivations of the prosecution. "Claims regarding the motivation for prosecution, or of selective-prosecution, are not defenses on the merits of the criminal charge itself, and therefore are not relevant to any material issue in this case," the attorney general's brief says.

The attorney general's spokeswoman, Joy Patterson, said Monday that Strange would have no comment beyond what is in the court papers.

Barron's trial comes as Strange campaigns for a second term. He has no opposition in the Republican primary June 3 and is opposed by Democratic state Rep. Joe Hubbard of Montgomery in the general election Nov. 4.

Espy, Barron's attorney, said Monday he plans to file a response to the attorney general before the hearing Friday.

Espy is a University of Alabama trustee and is known for taking on high-profile cases. In 2013, he successfully defended VictoryLand casino owner Milton McGregor on federal bribery charges. He also successfully defended Democratic state Sen. Roger Bedford of Russellville on extortion charges in 2003, and he helped former Democratic Gov. Don Siegelman with his unsuccessful effort to get a recount after the 2002 election.

[Alabama's national parks create \\$26.5 million economic benefit, report shows \(al.com\)](#)

Visitors to national parks in Alabama spent \$26.5 million and supported 381 jobs in the state in 2012, according to a new National Park Service report.

The parks in the state attracted 717,724 visitors from across the U.S. and the world that year, said Stan Austin, NPS Southeast Regional Director.

"Exploring Alabama's national parks immerses visitors in the struggles of American Indian survival at Horseshoe Bend and Russell Cave, the triumphs of African Americans at Tuskegee Institute and Tuskegee Airmen, and the wilds of the Little River Canyon," Austin said in a prepared statement.

The report also shows that national park tourism is a significant driver in the national economy, returning \$10 for every \$1 invested in the National Park Service, Austin said.

Alabama's national parks include Horseshoe Bend National Military Park, Russell Cave National Monument, Little River Canyon National Preserve, Tuskegee Institute National Historic Site, Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site and portions of Natchez Trace Parkway.

Nationwide, there was \$14.7 billion of direct spending by 283 million park visitors in communities within 60 miles of a national park, the report shows.

The spending supported 243,000 jobs nationally and had a cumulative benefit to the U.S. economy of \$26.75 billion.

Most visitor spending supports jobs in restaurants, grocery and convenience stores (39 percent); hotels, motels and B&Bs (27 percent); and other amusement and recreation (20 percent).

[How much does Alabama A&M mean to state? Even economist admits, 'I was amazed' \(al.com\)](#)

Alabama A&M University had an economic impact of almost \$350 million on the state in the 2011-12 academic year, according to a University of Alabama study.

The study was presented Friday to a group of Alabama A&M trustees who gathered for the board's February meeting. A quorum of trustees was not present, however, and those who were there received the report.

Samuel Addy, an associate dean at the Culverhouse College of Commerce at the University of Alabama, presented the report to the trustees.

"I was amazed at the end of our study," Addy told the trustees. "I have thought of Alabama A&M as a small university in the north part of Alabama. But you do have a large impact on this state and on this special area. "

According to the study, Alabama A&M had a \$349.8 million impact on the state for the 2011-2012 academic year, providing 1,612 jobs and \$12.3 million in income and sales taxes. The study said the school created an impact of \$8.66 for every \$1 in state appropriations. Alabama A&M received \$40.4 million in state funding in 2011, according to the report.

In the Huntsville metro area, made up of Madison and Limestone counties, Alabama A&M's impact was \$227.8 million, 1,404 jobs and \$2.9 million in local sales tax.

"Clearly, AAMU is an attractive investment for both its graduates and the state of Alabama," the report states. "The university provides many other public and private benefits as well, some of which are difficult to quantify."

[Trouble brewing at UWA as alumni president calls for investigation into board interference \(al.com\)](#)

LIVINGSTON, Alabama -- The president of the University of West Alabama's national alumni association has filed a complaint with the accrediting agency SACS, alleging misconduct by the school's board of trustees.

In a press release, UWA National Alumni President Emeritus Mike Holliman said the complaint was the result of trustees interfering with the school's day-to-day operations, including "attempts to control personnel decisions."

He calls on the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges Commissions, the regional body for accrediting all of the South's degree-granting institutions, to investigate the board.

According to The Tuscaloosa News, UWA President Richard Holland alleged university trustees tampered with the school's annual presidential evaluation to skew its results as he seeks to extend his contract until 2016.

A blistering 19-page addendum to the the president's response to his review was released by President Holland's office over the weekend.

It alleged Vice President of Institutional Advancement Clemit Spruiell, aided by Business College Dean Ken Tucker, provided trustee Jerry Smith a list of respondents handpicked to give negative feedback on President Holland

It also alleged Spruiell provided Trustee Terry Bunn a list of concerns about the president's leadership, and Holland's responses to those concerns that in one case gave.

[Click here to download a copy of the the addendum from UWA President Richard Holland.]

Holliman alleged board members of repeatedly demanded certain people be hired and specific employees by fired and that they planned to fire Holland today for not going along.

He also alleged the board leadership has conducted "their campaign of interference through the use of fear and intimidation and that "they may attempt to cover up their tracks."

"For all of us in the UWA family, this call for an investigation of the Board is a bitter pill to swallow," said Holliman. "But sometimes a bitter pill is the only medicine that will allow you to get healthy again. The Board has to be stopped before their damage to the University is permanent."

Alabama's dangerously overcrowded prisons attract national attention (Yellowhammer News)

The national media has begun bringing widespread attention to the serious problems in Alabama's underfunded, overcrowded prison system. In the last several days alone, the New York Times, Washington Post and Associated Press have all published widely disseminated articles on the ongoing problems in the system, most notably at the Julia Tutwiler Prison for Women, where the U.S. Justice Department says conditions were once so bad they likely violated the inmates' constitutional rights.

From the Washington Post:

Built in 1942 in the sleepy town of Wetumpka, Alabama's lone prison for women has a "history of unabated staff-on-prisoner sexual abuse and harassment," the U.S. Department of Justice wrote in a scathing report in January. DOJ accused Alabama of violating inmates' constitutional rights to be protected from harm, alleging that corrections officers had assaulted inmates, coerced inmates into sex, inappropriately watched inmates in the showers and bathrooms and once even helped in a New Year's Eve strip show.

From the New York Times:

Corrections officers have raped, beaten and harassed women inside the aging prison here for at least 18 years, according to an unfolding Justice Department investigation. More than a third of the employees have had sex with prisoners, which is sometimes the only currency for basics like toilet paper and tampons.

Gov. Bentley told The Times that the DOJ's report does not paint an accurate picture of Tutwiler in 2014.

"I thought they took past offenses over many years and put them into their report as if all of those offenses were occurring today," he said. "They did not take into account all the remedies that had been put in place or were beginning to be put in place when they actually came in to visit."

Based on all the information Yellowhammer has been able to gather from numerous sides, including lawmakers and former prisoners, Gov. Bentley is right.

But while Tutwiler has become the proverbial poster child for Alabama's prison problems — and a human rights and PR disaster, no doubt — it's the larger overcrowding issue that threatens to destabilize the entire system and compel the federal government to get involved.

The New York Times over the weekend questioned whether the recent reports at Tutwiler will be enough to spur reform. Early indications are that this year's General Fund budget won't contain any more funding for prisons than last year's budget. Gov. Bentley's proposed budget actually included \$7 million less.

Alabama has the second-highest number of inmates per capita in the nation and the state's prisons are filled to roughly twice their capacity.

California serves as an example of what can happen when the federal government is forced to intervene.

In the 2011 Supreme Court case *Brown v. Plata*, the Court effectively required the State of California to remove 46,000 criminals from its prisons by forcing The Golden State to cut its prison population to 137.5 percent of "design capacity."

The Public Policy Institute of California found that property crime increased by 7.6 percent the year after the mass releases. Car thefts rose almost 15 percent. In short, 24,000 more people had their car

stolen in California in 2012 as a result of the state not being able to get its prison overcrowding problem under control.

Alabama's prisons are currently at roughly 187 percent capacity, 50 percent higher than the level the Court mandated for California.

More from the New York Times:

"Yes, we need to rectify the crimes that happened at Tutwiler, but going forward it's a bigger problem than just Tutwiler," said State Senator Cam Ward, a Republican from Alabaster who is chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee. "We're dealing with a box of dynamite."

The solution, Mr. Ward and others say, is not to build more prisons but to change the sentencing guidelines that have filled the prisons well beyond capacity.

Just over half the state's prisoners are locked up for drug and property crimes, a rate for nonviolent offenses that is among the highest in the nation.

"No one wants to be soft on crime, but the way we're doing this is just stupid," Mr. Ward said.

As Yellowhammer wrote earlier this year, legislators must reform Alabama's prisons or risk a federal judge doing it for us.

Inmates hospitalized after Elmore prison brawl (WSFA)

ELMORE, AL (WSFA) -

A large fight at a state penitentiary in Elmore left eight inmates injured Sunday.

Brian Corbett, spokesman for the Alabama Department of Corrections, says the fight broke out Sunday night at the Elmore Correctional Facility on Marion Spillway Rd.

According to Corbett, eight inmates were sent to Jackson Hospital in Montgomery and three were admitted to the hospital for further treatment. He could not provide any details on their injuries.

The brawl was isolated to one of the prison dormitories and involved only inmates. No corrections officers were injured. The officers responded and regained control of the dorm, putting an end to the skirmish.

The incident is still under investigation as officials work to determine who started the fight and exactly how many inmates were involved.

No other details were released. It is unclear what sparked the riot.

According to the Department of Corrections website, Elmore Correctional Facility originated as a temporary institution in 1981 using modular units for dormitories and a permanently constructed dining hall. During July 1991, three dormitories were constructed with a capacity for 300 inmates each.

Martha Roby: Military budget should reflect strategies (Montgomery Advertiser)

Last week, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel previewed some significant changes coming for our nation's military. Though the details won't be public until President Obama releases his proposed budget today, we know the size and scope of our Armed Forces will be greatly reduced. In fact, under the president's proposal, the Army would shrink to its pre-World War II size.

Every American should be concerned about how budget cuts are affecting our Armed Forces and what that means for our national priorities. No area of the budget is immune from belt-tightening and that certainly includes the military. And, with the drawdown of forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, certain changes to the military are expected and, in many ways, necessary.

However, any changes to our Armed Forces should reflect national priorities, not budgetary or political circumstances. The United States must first decide what is required to protect this country and its interests, and then budget accordingly. I fear we are doing the opposite, letting limited funding dictate strategic decisions.

One of the reasons I opposed the Budget Control Act of 2011 was because of the way the bill cut a disproportional amount from defense relative to other areas of the budget. The sequestration cuts imposed by that law took 50 percent from the military when defense spending represents only 20 percent of the federal budget.

Now, the drastic military cuts most thought would be a one-time occurrence have become the new normal, and the problem is getting worse. Why? Because out-of-control spending elsewhere in the federal government continues to consume a greater and greater portion of our resources, and there's only so much to go around.

A lot of politicians in Washington don't like to talk about it, but the fact is unrestrained growth of "auto-pilot" social programs is threatening our ability to properly fund the military. A recent report from the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office outlined how, without changes to current law, mandatory spending on social programs and subsidized health care will grow at an extraordinary rate over the next 25 years, while non-mandatory spending, where military funding comes from, will shrink to dangerous levels. Mandatory spending is automatic in nature and does not change unless the law does, which is the reason behind its "auto-pilot" growth.

The CBO prediction would fulfill a decades-long trend. Mandatory spending has increased dramatically over the decades, going from about 20 percent of the budget in the 1960s to about 45 percent in the 1980s to more than 60 percent today. And, as mandatory spending has consumed a greater share of the budget, the military's portion has decreased just as dramatically.

To put this in perspective, in ten years the United States could spend as much or more on our annual debt payments than we do on national defense if we continue down this path. What kind of message does that send to our enemies or those who seek to undermine our global influence?

Admiral Mike Mullen, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recognized how failure to reform mandatory spending would lead to military cuts, stating in 2010 that "national debt is our biggest national security threat."

The problem isn't limited to the military. Funding for other American priorities like transportation infrastructure, education, agriculture, or other legitimate interests is also threatened by unrestrained growth of social welfare programs.

Unfortunately, our commander-in-chief has failed to show leadership on this issue. President Obama's budget proposal reportedly contains no reforms to rein in mandatory spending, despite widespread agreement that reforms are desperately needed. Too often, President Obama and his party choose to believe the falsehood that the government can somehow tax its way out of every problem.

Congress took a small step in the right direction late last year by passing the Bipartisan Budget Act, which restored some military funding cut by sequestration and made modest reforms to mandatory

spending. I hope we can use that step to build momentum for more long-term reforms that help get our fiscal house in order.

The Constitution calls on the United States government to “promote the general welfare” as well as to “provide for the common defense.” We cannot allow one responsibility to continue to undermine the other.

House GOP budget will focus on reforming welfare, overhauling social programs (Washington Post)

By Robert Costa, Published: March 2

As a direct counter to President Obama’s recent emphasis on the gap between rich and poor, the upcoming House Republican budget will focus on welfare reform and recommend a sweeping overhaul of social programs, including Head Start and Medicaid.

The push, led by Rep. Paul Ryan, returns the GOP’s attention to a policy front that animated the party in the 1990s and signals Republicans’ desire to expand their pitch to voters ahead of this year’s midterm elections. This new effort comes after the party spent months fixated on combating the federal health-care law and engaged in intraparty squabbles over fiscal strategy.

On Monday, Ryan (R-Wis.), the House Budget Committee chairman, published an often stinging 204-page critique of the federal government’s anti-poverty policies, questioning the efficacy of dozens of initiatives and underscoring where Republicans say consolidation or spending reductions are needed.

“There are nearly 100 programs at the federal level that are meant to help, but they have actually created a poverty trap,” Ryan said in an interview. “There is no coordination with these programs, and new ones are frequently being added without much consideration to how they affect other programs. We’ve got to fix the situation, and this report is a first step toward significant reform.”

Ryan said the report is a -prelude to the House GOP’s budget, which will be unveiled later this month, and a preemptive rebuttal to the president’s budget, which will be released Tuesday.

The report, titled “The War on Poverty: 50 Years Later,” features analysis of eight areas of federal policy: cash aid, education and job training, energy, food aid, health care, housing, social services, and veterans affairs. Most sections begin with a glance at the state of federal anti-poverty -programs

50 years ago, when President Lyndon B. Johnson launched a “war on poverty,” and chart their evolution and expansion.

“This document is a precursor not only of our budget but of our larger project to introduce poverty reforms over the course of this year,” Ryan said. “The president may focus on inequality because he can’t talk about growth. We’re focused on upward mobility, speaking directly to people who have fallen through the cracks.”

Food stamps, low-income housing, and a flurry of other social service programs and tax credits are also targeted in the report. Ryan said Republicans will soon offer specific prescriptions to the problems he outlines. Putting a comprehensive anti-poverty agenda alongside efforts to devise an alternative to the federal health-care law is a GOP priority, he said.

“Let’s have the debate, let’s show where we stand, and then let’s solve the problems,” Ryan said. “It’s time for an adult conversation as well as time to try to pass good, conservative legislation that can make a real difference.”

Ryan’s staff has kept his welfare reform plan quiet — spending weeks polishing the report in the committee’s office in the Cannon Building — as other issues including tax reform, immigration and foreign policy have dominated political talk at the Capitol.

But with many of the fiscal standoffs, such as the one over the debt ceiling, resolved, and with the president hitting the campaign trail to discuss income inequality, Ryan decided in the past week to come forward with his long-brewing report, with hints at many of the topics he will address in the upcoming Republican budget plan.

“He is trying to move us to a place where we ought to go,” said Rep. Tom Cole (R-Okla.), an ally of House Speaker John A. Boehner (R-Ohio.). “Paul Ryan remains our big-ideas guy, and he’s helping us to get beyond statistics and to start talking about these issues in human terms.”

Ryan, who was Mitt Romney’s running mate on the GOP presidential ticket in 2012, said Republicans are ready to engage with Democrats on one of the president’s signature issues, hoping to move beyond the rhetoric of past campaigns and provide voters with a sense of which programs they would like to revamp.

Ryan and his aides are unsparing in how they take the hammer to current federal policies. On page after page, the report casts a critical eye on how the government administers money to the poor and related bureaucracies, using a bevy of academic literature and federal studies as evidence.

Ryan said the crux of the report is the conclusion that federal programs need to be entirely reimagined, with more than tweaks or axed appropriations, and that legislation this year should move toward broader solutions that solve what he thinks are structural weaknesses in how the government supports the poor.

"Because these programs are means-tested — meaning that benefits decline as recipients make more money — poor families face very high implicit marginal tax rates," the report says. "The federal government effectively discourages them from making more money."

According to the report, Head Start, a federal program for early-childhood education and nutrition, is "failing to prepare children for school," and "a consolidated, well-funded system would be better."

Medicaid, which provides health coverage to low-income families, is the object of a sharply worded review. "Medicaid coverage has little effect on patients' health," the report says, adding that it imposes an "implicit tax on beneficiaries," "crowds out private insurance" and "increases the likelihood of receiving welfare benefits."

The report also suggests that the "breakdown" of the family is one of the main reasons that poverty afflicts so many Americans.

"Perhaps the single most important determinant of poverty is family structure," the report says. "Poverty is most concentrated among broken families."

Ryan said the report is a complement to his work on poverty over the past year, when he has traveled with Bob Woodson, a veteran community organizer, to meet with struggling residents of cities such as Cleveland, Indianapolis and San Antonio.

"In visit after visit, I've learned that we've got to stop measuring success by how much we spend and start measuring success by how much we help," he said. "That's the debate we need to shift."

In recent months, Democrats have pushed to increase the federal minimum wage, part of a campaign to make income inequality a keystone of their 2014 platform and portray the GOP as the less-compassionate party on poverty issues.

"It is time to give America a raise or elect more Democrats who will do it," Obama said in a speech Friday to Democrats at their winter meeting in Washington.

Democrats on Capitol Hill are skeptical about Ryan's intentions, and they wonder whether the 44-year-old Republican is serious about working with Obama and other Democrats to pass bipartisan

legislation on welfare reform, an issue that last saw major cross-party deliberations in 1996, when House Republicans worked with President Bill Clinton to pass landmark changes.

“The real test is what Republicans will put in their budget this year, and if past is prologue, this report is simply laying the groundwork to slash social -safety-net programs,” said Rep. Chris Van Hollen (Md.), the ranking Democrat on the Budget Committee. “It’s part of Mitt Romney’s attack on the 47 percent. Now, I hope this time is different, but I fear it won’t be.”

Ryan’s associates said the congressman proved last year, when he brokered a budget deal with Senate Democrats, that he can build consensus across the aisle.

As he crafted the report, Ryan — a former adviser to the late Jack Kemp, a longtime GOP voice on poverty issues — consulted with a diverse group of conservative thinkers. Ryan counselor Yuval Levin, a policy analyst, played an instrumental role, as did the American Enterprise Institute’s Arthur Brooks and the Brookings Institution’s Ron Haskins.

Ryan also huddled with Iain Duncan Smith, a former leader of Britain’s Conservative Party. Smith is well known in the United Kingdom for his attempts to better connect conservatives with the poor.

“We’ve been paying very close attention to the Tories and their think tanks,” Ryan said. “They’ve done a lot of work already, and we can learn from their experience, both their mistakes and their successes, so we can rework our welfare system and get people out of poverty and onto lives of self-sufficiency and dignity.”

House Majority Whip Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.) said that House Republicans will offer a “combination of solutions” to voters this fall and that he supports Ryan as he builds the GOP’s welfare reform plan.

“This conference has grown, with regard to the different things it wants to look at. People used to say we couldn’t talk about these issues,” he said. “Now they have become a framework.”